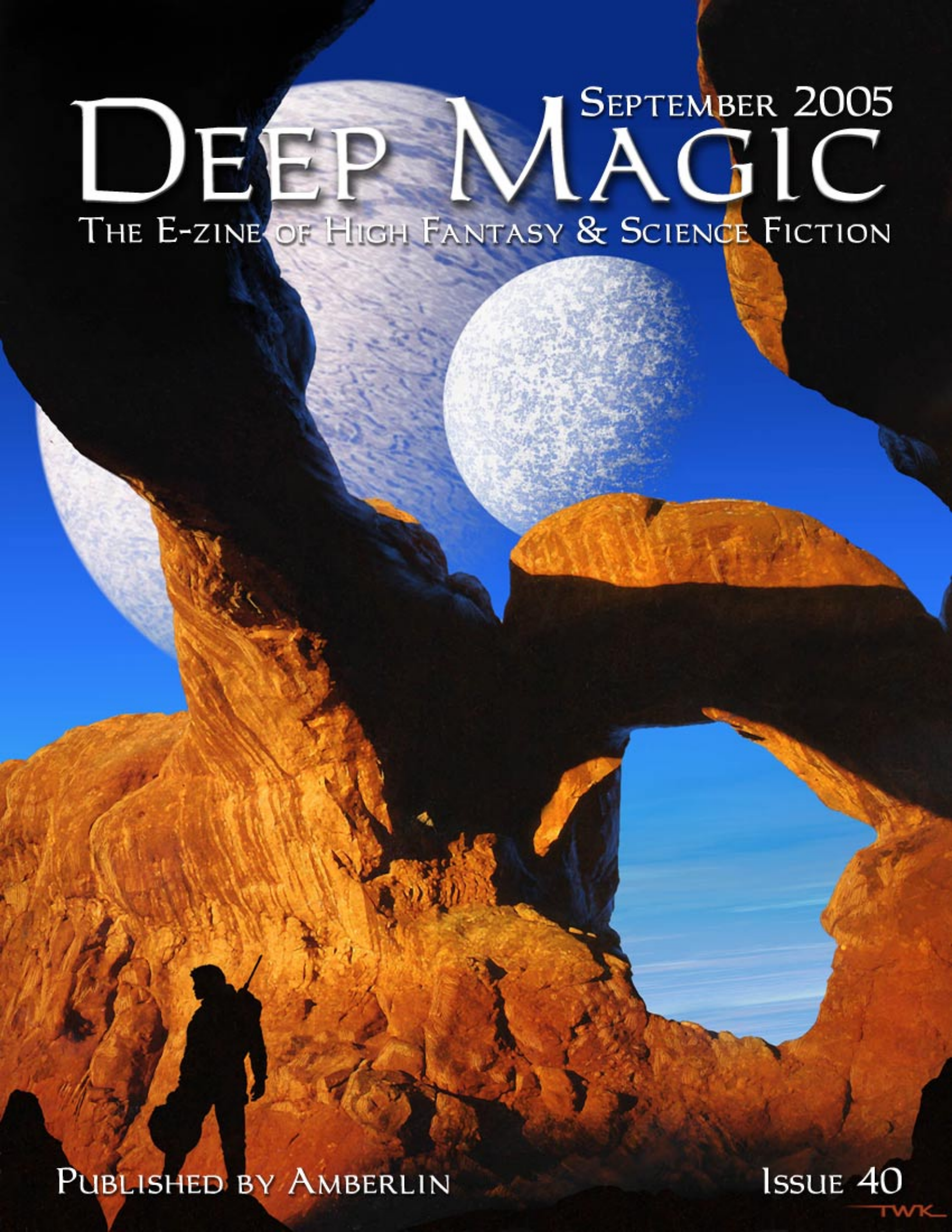
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Cover by Tim Kuzniar
"Explorer"

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September 2005

Welcome to another issue of Deep Magic, and more importantly, to a brand new look and feel for our website. Resident evil overlord of computers, Steven, has revamped the look, automated the inner workings, and served up another programming wonder. Our staff is harried night and day by the flood of submissions we have been receiving lately. Exciting times, to say the least.

In this issue, we welcome artist Tim Kuzniar with his inspirational piece called "Explorer." This has provided spirited entries for the special writing challenge announced two months ago. This is where we need you, our readers, to step in and vote on which writing challenge made the best beginning of a story. Many from our staff jumped in as well (though staff members are not eligible for the prize money). What we need you to do is to vote for your favorite submissions (staff and non-staff) so that the authors can crank out the rest of the story. Visit here for more details.

Within this issue, you will also find E.J. Hayes' story of revenge, *Blackthorn*. Then Robyn Hay delights us with *Gothar's Mountains*, and Nyki Blatchley concludes with *Present Historic*. We have enjoyed the wide variety of new talent that has been drawn to our pages since June. We hope you have enjoyed their works as well.

In addition to Tim Kuzniar's art, we also share in this issue the work of Patrick Turner in an internal spread. We conclude Mark Reeder's novel *Shadowloom* in this issue as well. And we also are delighted to have interviewed Carol Berg, author of the Bridge of D'Arnath series. The final book, *Daughter of Ancients*, was released this month.

Once again, we would like to thank the many volunteers on our staff. Truly, we would be overwhelmed by this operation without so many dedicated and persevering staff members. Their hard work makes these issues happen every month. And thanks to you, our readers, as well. You are the reason we keep doing this.

Wishing you all a happy autumn, if that season is in your hemisphere this month.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

September 2005
Writing Challenge
Entries due Oct 10, 2005

Unique and imaginative flora and fauna bring a fantasy world to life. As we continue to blow on the ember of life in Kenatos, we have seen many interesting submissions for the fauna of our fair land. Now it is time to add the plant life and vegetation.

The challenge: write a scene set in Kenatos wherein some form of plant life plays a central role. Be creative and descriptive, but do not exceed 750 words.

Don't forget the August 'Horror' challenge, due Sept 10, 2005!

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

Selections from the July 2005 Challenge

The July writing challenge, as you remember, is also a contest with a $25 cash (well, PayPal) prize. We need your help. The top selections are listed below (to the left). Read them, then vote for your two (2) favorite selections here. The top three selections will be completed by the authors and published in the October issue; then, you will all vote on the winner. In addition, the staff is competing for bragging rights. Staff entries are below to the right. Read them and pick your two favorites here. The top three will be completed and published in October for a final vote. You, the readers, get to decide which staff member gets to gloat.

VOTE HERE!

Contest Entries

Bring Me the Moon
Hunter's Moon
Julianna's Awakening
Oren's Blade
To the Shores of Triple, Lee!
Walking the Rise

All challenges can be found at the end of this issue, but they can be reached by clicking on the titles above. At the end of each entry will be a link back to this page.

Staff Entries

A Bit of Karma
A Night Made For Betrayal
A Revision of Beauty
Beneath the Shifting Sands
Flinteye Learns a Lesson About Sharing
Fugitive Moments
Midstream
Long Arm of the Law
Paying For Redemption
The Nahi

Gothar's Mountains

By Robyn A. Hay

Long before the Dalph invaded the forests and mountains that comprised the Nalize motherland, Jonathan Samuel had promised his son that Gothar would never abandon his people. There was no stone, no tree within the mountain range his celebrants couldn't find. They instinctively knew the winding and weaving trails caused during the intricate dances between predator and prey. He'd refused to explain further, adding only that the land sang this promise.

Alexander had been out on this ledge for hours, watching the sun turn from bright yellow to a dim orange glow, trying in vain to solve the riddle to stop the Dalph encroachment.

"I know you're there, Gothar," he said quietly. "I see your hand in the unyielding strength of the mountains; how the delicate balance between land and animal remains untouched. But there must be something we can do."

He absently brushed his fingers along the bedrock, remembering simpler times when strife only followed games of hide-and-seek. His mother had been so angry when she learned he'd forgotten to find his baby sister.

Memories of the past made his resolve to stay strong falter. It lasted only an instant, but long enough for emotions to betray him. "Gothar, where is my father? What happened to your priests?"

He dared not make a noise, strained to hear something, anything tangible. The night wind ruffled his hair, carrying nothing but the lonely howl of a wolf.

There were secrets hidden in these mountains going back generations. He remembered them from simple stories, some held in the hands of scholars while others were best left forgotten.

No matter the question, Gothar remained evasive as ever.

A pained, remorseful smile curved his lips. He'd wasted valuable seconds on a selfish emotion when his people suffered. Though, in his defense, nothing anyone had done had made any difference. The alien presence trampling across his homeland grew stronger, soiling everything his people held dear.

A flicker of power surged within the lantern resting at his feet. The flame seemed to grow in strength while the natural landscape of the mountains disappeared into soft blackness, leaving only their sharp outline against the darkening blue sky.

His eyes narrowed in thought.

There were secrets hidden in these mountains going back generations. He remembered them from simple stories, some held in the hands of scholars while others were best left forgotten. Being the son of a priest, he'd heard all the tales of Nalize triumphs and failings. Moreover, he understood the sacrifices his ancestors had made to bring them under the guidance of Gothar. But if a god wouldn't answer the needs of his people, few choices remained but to refute good judgment and fight back with whatever was at their disposal, no matter how bad the idea.

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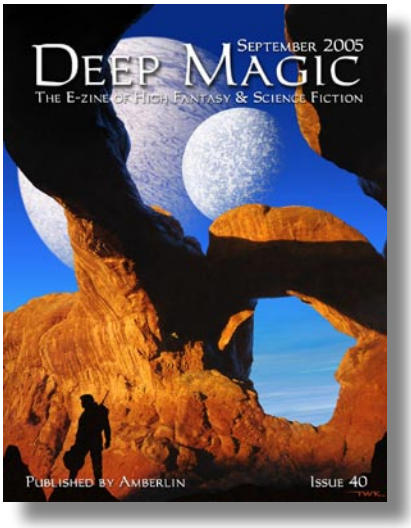
Featured Artist
Tim Kuzniar



Age: 50
Residence: Highlands Ranch, CO
Marital Status: Married
Children: None
Hobbies: Fine art, scale modeling, sculpture, carpentry, photography, electronics, computers.
Personal Quote: "Until the least member of our society can realize their personal ambitions, we have work to do."
Favorite Book or Author: Fantasy: "Lord of the Rings" by J.R.R. Tolkien; Science Fiction: The Childe Cycle (Dorsai) by Gordon R. Dickson; Overall favorite author—Arthur C. Clarke.
Started Painting In: 1970
Artist Most Inspired By: Chesley Bonestell
Media You Work In: Acrylics / Digital
Schools Attended: Youngstown (OH) State University—BS, Astronomy/Earth Science; Graduate Study in Secondary Education.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Various planetariums, museums and other institutions, including NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; the NASA Lewis Research Center, Cleveland, Ohio; SpaceWeek at the NASA Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas, as well as professional science, education and artistic conferences in Washington, DC, Vancouver, BC, Tucson, Chicago, Baltimore, St. Louis, Portland, Seattle, Orlando, and Tampa. SF&F conventions in Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Denver and Pasadena.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: Annual StarFest SF&F convention in Denver, CO (every April); E-mail: tim@autumnstar.net.
Website URL: www.autumnstar.net.

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: Naturally. When I was in grade school I started doing crude sketches and drawings of my favorite book characters and scenarios as well as TV show characters and movie scenes. Later, I got interested in charcoal and pastel sketching thanks to my sixth grade art teacher. I gravitated toward doing landscapes and, almost by neccessity for a teenage boy, hot rods and race cars. Later, in junior high school, I discovered the space program and immediately dropped the cars in favor of rockets and spaceships. I had been reading science fiction for a number of years and also started doing pieces of art which tried to show alien landscapes and civilizations. After getting interested in astronomy and experiencing my first planetarium show, I became familiar with the work of Chesley Bonestell, regarded as the father of astronomical art. Here was a real challenge, I thought, to accurately portray what planets, stars, nebulas and other actual astronomical objects might look like if we were there to see them with our own eyes. When I

continued on next page

started in college I was fortunate to get a job at that university's planetarium as a show producer, mainly doing artwork and illustrations which combined my artistic talents with my interest in astronomy and space exploration to tell a story and help educate the public. Though I no longer regularly participate in the planetarium field, the desire to do such artwork and continue telling the story remains.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I try for the photo-realistic approach, similar to what was pioneered by Mr. Bonestell. Yes, I've had comments from people who say "Well, if you want it to look like a photograph, just grab a camera and take a picture..!" Be glad to—if I could walk on the surface of the Moon, Mars or any other planet, or even in my fantasy works, if I could just find where those dragons hang out to get a good photo. But you can't do that. So the next best thing is to try and recreate the subject as close as possible to reality to let the viewer experience something of what it might be like to actually see these fantastic sights.

On the other side of the art spectrum, regarding my portrait work, the same holds true. Whether I'm doing a figure sketch of Batman, a period characterization of Vincent Price or a scenario from the latest Star Wars film, I try to do the piece to make it look as though the character (whether real or fictional) actually came in for a studio sitting. I work from the best detailed reference photos I can obtain to get that extra detail—the wrinkles where they belong, the sparkle in the eye, the curl of the hair. While I can certainly appreciate the vision and talent responsible for more impressionistic works, I've never wanted to do that. My talent seems to lie in the realm of realistic illustration so I've just gone with that.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Anywhere. Inspiration is fleeting and mercurial, so I grab it whenever and wherever I can. Most of mine seems to come from nature or from feelings about nature. I got an idea for a piece the other day just from seeing the color of the clouds at sunset. On a recent road trip I saw a piece of deadwood used as a landscaping element at a roadside rest stop and immediately got a vision of how future science and technology might be used by architects and engineers to create artistic buildings based on natural design. Sometimes it's kind of scary how these things just pop into your head. Who needs drugs or alcohol—I get high enough just on creativity!

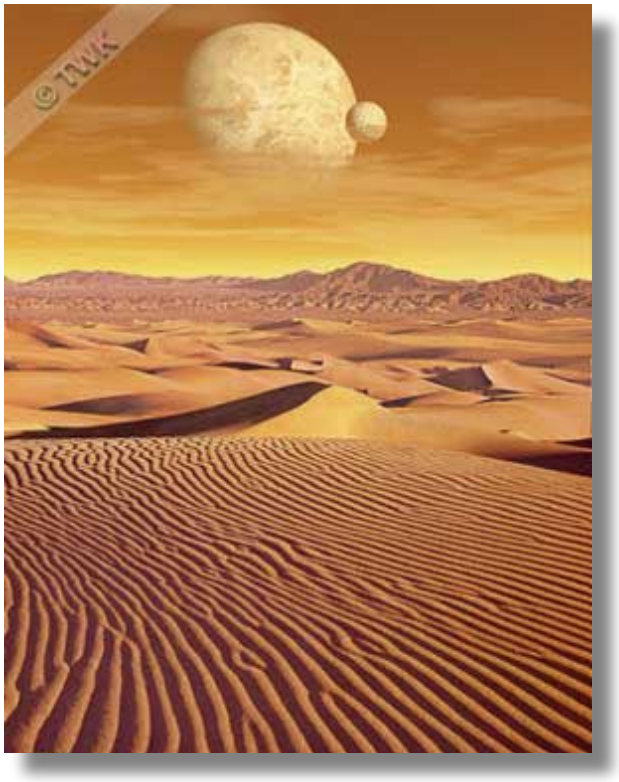
Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)
A: This piece I called "Explorer." It had been a while since I did a work promoting the fact that we as humans have the ability to explore the universe. The idea for the piece came from a trip to Arches National Monument near Moab, Utah. The geology of the area has shaped many rock formations into these interesting arches. It is a basic premise in science that the same rules that affect the environment here on Earth will act in a similar fashion everywhere else

continued on next page

in the universe. So, if somewhere out in space there is a planet similar in size and geological composition to Earth, with a similar atmosphere and standard patterns of weather and erosion, then the probability is high that similar landforms will be created over geological time. Starting with that, I simply did a rendering of a rock arch similar to the ones I saw in Utah.

As I wanted this piece to have a slightly science fiction flavor, I envisioned the landscape we are seeing as being on an Earth-sized moon of a large gas-giant planet. I also put another moon into the sky for added effect. The result immediately cues in the viewer that, despite the familiar looking rock formations, this place is definitely not our own world. Finally, I added the astronaut figure as an explorer. She's in silhouette to emphasize the fact that the technology of her spacesuit or other equipment is not important, nor is she, as an individual. The figure is there to represent humanity as the "explorer" that may one day witness this kind of environment first hand.

How the piece was done—I began by painting the rock arches using standard acrylic paints on illustration board about 12 inches by 15 inches. I also painted the surface detail used on the planet and moon that appear in the sky as separate pieces of strip art, about 5 inches by 12 inches. Then all three pieces were digitized into my computer with an EPSON scanner. Using Photoshop paint tools, I created a blue sky background with airbrushed clouds near the horizon, and then layered my rock landscape overtop. In Bryce software, I imported my planet and moon detail as texture maps and wrapped them around 3-D spheres, adjusting the phase angle from the digital "sun" to match the lighting on my rock arches. I then exported the planetary spheres into Photoshop, sizing and compositing them for best effect. Lastly, I created the astronaut explorer figure as a silhouette, using a Wacom Graphics tablet and stylus again with Photoshop paint tools.



Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: As I mentioned above, the main influence in my artwork would have to be Chesley Bonsestell, known not only for his astronomical art but for having been one of the premiere matte painters for motion pictures in Hollywood in the 40's, 50's and early 60's. Other influences would have to include Maxfield Parrish, Alphonse Mucha and some of the great landscape painters like Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Church and Thomas Moran. I absolutely love Alex Ross' comics illustrations as well as the design illustrations of Syd Mead, the vibrant space program art of Robert McCall and the classic pen and ink sketches of Virgil Finlay. Needless to say, Frank Frazetta and Michael Whelan rule.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: There's not one distinct thing that I can point to, really. I've had the privilege to be a part of a couple of large-scale multimedia projects and also to have some of my art hang in a few higher profile art shows. Also, some of my character portraits are owned by the celebrities who created

continued on next page

those characters. But I would have to say that my greatest success is being able to do the kind of artwork that I like to do and having an audience that is appreciative of it. For me, artwork has never been about pursuing fame and fortune. It's been about using my talent to craft unique visions of the things I like and the things I think are important to remind people about, and then having someone respond to that. I think of my artwork as a way to be of service to others and to bring into their lives some beauty, imagination and perhaps an alternate viewpoint that they may not have considered before. If one of my pieces inspires someone in their own life, motivates them to do something or consider something new, or just plain makes them happy, then I feel that is my success.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: In the fields of art and illustration there certainly is a lot of fantasy artwork being produced these days, no doubt due to the success of the Lord of the Rings and the Harry Potter films. I've done some as well, and plan to do more, since it is a good way to exercise the unfettered imagination. Doing a lot of astronomical and space art as well as spacecraft and hardware pieces, sometimes you need to get away from that technological specificity and from the adherence to the rules and reality of science, astronomy and engineering. Still, that is my first love and I will always be an unabashed cheerleader for it. But there are only a few people who do that kind of thing very well, so good, accurate space art is still something of a rarity.

In the sci-fi/fantasy literary world, I'm more of old-school kind of guy, growing up with authors the likes of Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov. While there are some very good books and stories being written today, I find too much of a trend toward introspection and interpersonal relationships at the expense of forward-thinking bold visions of progress and the future. Part of that is, no doubt, due to the times we live in. We, as a society, seem to have lost our verve for crafting a new and better world and then going out and making it happen. There are a few authors who still do that kind of thing for me; Stephen Baxter is chief among them. Greg Benford is another.

In the sci-fi/fantasy media world we seem to be on a comic-book kick—not that that's a bad thing. I'm very much looking forward to the new Batman flick, the Fantastic Four and next year's Superman. I also loved how Lucas wrapped up the Star Wars saga, though I'm saddened that it's all over, and I can't wait for Spielberg's reimagining of War of the Worlds. These films aside, though, I see a definite trend of adaptation and rewrites. Nothing wrong with doing the classics—I eagerly anticipate the rumored "Princess of Mars" by Edgar Rice Burroughs—but I have to wonder where all of the original ideas are hiding. And where did the hard core science fiction go? Where is the next "2001: A Space Odyssey"? Where are the hard core space exploration and future Earth visions? If Cameron makes his Mars movie, that would be one. But almost all of the films running these days have strong fantasy elements in them. I want to see some "science" back in the science fiction.

Present Historic

By Nyki Blatchley

Amforli Ferriji sat in the cool dimness of the Zartorin Cafe, sipping a lukewarm, fizzy drink and reading her comic-book. She knew she wasn't supposed to come in here. Although it wasn't actually illegal, even when you were ten, her parents hinted darkly that bad things happened in the cafes down near the docks. Ferriji didn't actually know what the bad things were, but she suspected they were something to do with the people who got invited out to the back of the place.

She liked this place, though, because of its name, even though they'd spelt it wrong. It was connected with her favourite story and the comic she was reading now. Besides, it was cool in here, air-conditioned and sheltered from the blazing afternoon sun. She enjoyed looking up from her reading sometimes, out through the small window, to see the crowds of people sweating along the street and hear the electric purr of passing cars.

"Is anyone sitting here?"

Ferriji looked up in surprise at the voice, and her dark eyes widened in even greater surprise to see the man standing by the table. Instead of dark brown, like herself and everyone else in the cafe, he was light-skinned like a Northlander. Of course, Northlanders weren't unknown in Qymssa, especially here in the commercial cities of the Delta, but it wasn't common to see one. Especially a man as old as this dressed like a teenager, in a multicoloured shirt and exaggeratedly baggy trousers. His long, shaggy hair was white, and his eyes green and slanted as a cat's.

Of course, Northlanders weren't unknown in Qymssa, especially here in the commercial cities of the Delta, but it wasn't common to see one. Especially a man as old as this dressed like a teenager, in a multicoloured shirt and exaggeratedly baggy trousers.

"Oh... no, I suppose not." Glancing quickly around the cafe, she let her eyes linger disapprovingly on the vacant table nearby, but the man failed to take the hint.

He settled himself down opposite Ferriji, setting down his drink in front of him and sipping it thoughtfully for a moment, while the child returned to her comic.

"Is that interesting?" he asked.

"What?" She looked up in confusion, to see that he was nodding in the direction of what she was reading. "Oh... yes. It's part of the *Adventures of the Traveller* series."

"Ah, the Traveller." His eyes looked amused. "You like those stories, do you?"

Ferriji nodded eagerly, her reservation gone suddenly at his clear interest in her obsession. "He was cool. I wish he was still around now. I wish I could meet him."

"Ah, you believe he was real, then?"

"Of *course* he was real," she retorted with a scorn only possible from a child. "Why, don't you?"

"Oh... more or less." The amusement was still on his face. "But what makes you think he

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Interview
Carol Berg

First time you tried to get something published: At my first writers' conference in 1998. I spoke to an editor about one of my early stories and was thrilled when she was interested enough to say she'd send a couple of chapters to a colleague of hers. Nothing came of that submission but a polite rejection, but it gave me hope that my work could interest a real publisher.
Authors Most Inspired By: Jane Austen, Mary Stewart, Mary Renault, Roger Zelazny, Edith Pargeter, Ellen Kushner, Wilkie Collins. Each one for particular books and varying aspects—mostly wonderful characters and/or delicious writing. I could include many more. I have always read across genres: fantasy, science fiction, mysteries, classics, spy thrillers, and historical fiction.
Schools Attended: Rice University, BA Math; University of Colorado, BS Computer Science. I never studied writing, though I took a lot of English at Rice, mostly so I could have a good excuse to read novels when the math and science work load got heavy! I taught high school math for a few years, but most of my professional life has been spent as a software engineer. I am now a full-time writer.
Published works (fiction/non-fiction/obituaries): The Books of the Rai-kirah (*Transformation*; *Revelation*; *Restoration*); *Song of the Beast*; The Bridge of D'Arnath Quartet (*Book 1: Son of Avonar*, *Book 2: Guardians of the Keep*, *Book 3: The Soul Weaver*).
Website URL: http://www.sff.net/people/carolberg

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published?
A: I started writing in 1989, never believing I could possibly get anything published. But in January, 1998, I began working on a new story that I knew right away was better than anything I had written before. It was called "Song of the Beast." A friend encouraged me to go to my first writers' conference—the Pikes Peak Writers Conference—to learn something about publishing. The conference was a tremendous experience. It was the first time I ever identified myself as a "writer."

By the next spring, 1999, "Song of the Beast" had won three "first novel" contests, and I had started writing a new book called "Transformation." I went to Pikes Peak again and signed up for a "read and critique session," an event featured at many writers' conferences. An aspiring writer sits in a circle with seven or eight other aspiring writers and reads the opening of his or her novel for an editor, who critiques the work on the spot. This feels something akin to ripping your chest open and exposing everything inside! I read the opening pages of "Transformation" for an editor from Roc Books. She didn't have much to say, so I, being paranoid, assumed she didn't like it.

I had also signed up for a brief "pitch" session with the same editor on the next day. My friend literally shoved me into the room, as I was on the verge of backing out. I couldn't figure out what to say to a New York Editor who didn't like my book. I rattled for ten nervous minutes. The editor waited patiently, and then said to send her "Transformation" as soon as it was finished. I was astounded.

By autumn, when "Transformation" was finished, an agent had read both "Song of the Beast" and "Transformation" and agreed to represent me. We sent the manuscript to

Roc, and—no kidding—three days later, I had an offer. A week later, I had a contract for "Transformation," "Song of the Beast," and the unwritten sequel to "Transformation" that eventually became "Revelation" and "Restoration." So I started late, but things happened really fast.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: Almost all the business aspect of my writing is handled via the internet. My editor and I correspond via email for everything from "are you going to be at World Fantasy Con?" to lengthy editorial revision letters. I also set up convention appearances, interviews, and even book signings through email. And my primary outreach to readers is by way of my website, email, email newsletter, and the WarriorOfTwoSouls online discussion group. I have even done "book discussions" with online fantasy chat groups.

It is terrific to be able to connect with hundreds of readers on a daily basis. At more conventional venues, such as signings or conventions (no pun intended!), I might interact with only a few hundred readers in a year.

Having been first published in the internet age, I can't imagine how isolated writers must have felt "back then." Writing is such a solitary profession. Sales data is rare, unspecific, and highly inaccurate. Reviews are wholly subjective, and the non-internet venues for reviews are quite limited. So it would be very easy for an author to believe the work of years vanishes into a black hole. It is most gratifying to hear that your work has touched real people.

Q: What has been your inspiration for the settings?
A: Sometimes my settings simply reflect places I've seen: a particular stream in Colorado, or a pool in Alberta, Canada, or a castle atop a crag in southern France. Readers who have traveled the U.S. Mountain West will recognize a few specific places (hint: Zion Canyon National Park shows up in one of my books).

But more often my settings take shape from my characters. In "Transformation," for example, my first "vision" of Aleksander was of this arrogant, wild, red-haired young man riding a horse across a treeless waste. The more I considered, the more I realized that his expansive, uninhibited personality was the product of a desert culture, a horse-loving tribe of warriors that had conquered an uneasy empire. Seyonne, on the other hand, was an introspective man. He was a warrior, but his battles were always fought alone inside the landscape of a human soul, and his secretive people hid their magical activities from the rest of the world. So I envisioned his lost homeland of Ezzaria as a green, rainy woodland, rich with life and magic, shadowy and hidden behind a great mountain range—a vivid contrast to the harsh realities of his captivity in Aleksander's empire.

In "Guardians of the Keep," a different desert became the training ground for a child being taught to slough off the bonds of human feeling and compassion. And in "The Soul Weaver," when I started working on the Bounded, the place where a teenager must go to learn of himself, I wanted to create a landscape that reflected the turmoil inside him. So I came up with a sunless, unstable world that is actually growing, expanding day by day so that a map of the world is never finished, but must be redone every day. The Bounded has pockets of great beauty, alongside a great deal of land that seems a waste. Anyone who has raised a troubled teenager will recognize it.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters?
A: This is very much like asking which of my children is my favorite! The answer might vary on any given day. Certainly my heroes and heroines are people I come to know very well, and I love certain aspects of all of them: Seri's resolve and intelligence, Aidan's grace and sense of humor, Karon's dedicated pacifism and romantic nature. I would have to say, though, that Seyonne and Aleksander, the heroes of the Books of the Rai-kirah, will always hold a special place in my particular pantheon, because the two of them and their unique relationship became so much more than I expected when I started writing them.

Two more of my favorite characters took their places on my shelf in quite different ways. When I was writing "Guardians of the Keep," I could not decide which of my two adult narrators would tell the story of the child who gets abducted by the Lords of Zhev'Na and taken to their fortress in the desert. After being stymied for days, I decided it might be an interesting challenge to let the child tell his own story. And so I began writing in the voice of a ten-year-old boy who believes he is evil. That was an exhilarating experience, and I ended up following Gerick through eleven years and three books. By the end of "Daughter of Ancients," I felt as if he were one of my own sons who had grown up in front of my eyes.

Sometimes a character can be brought into a story to fill a need and end up taking on a life of his own. This is what happened with Paulo, who appeared first in "Son of Avonar." I needed someone to find a mysterious knife and carry a message for the heroine. To serve these needs, I introduced this illiterate ragamuffin kid named Paulo, who loved horses. He fulfilled his "mission" in the book and then refused to leave. He hung around my main characters until the end of the book, making himself useful in many ways, and then, by golly, he showed up in the early chapters of "Guardians of the Keep" just in case Seri might need him. He followed my three main characters into the desert, and became more important than I could ever have imagined. He is something like the conscience of the D'Arnath series, the grounding for three larger than life people who are caught up in strange and terrible events. Paulo may be my favorite of all my characters. Aargh, but then there is Jen, new in "Daughter of Ancients". . .

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: My mother, my English teachers, and books, books, books.

My mother was always in the middle of reading book from as early as I can remember, and we had more books than toys, shoes, or anything else in our house. She encouraged my sisters and me to read books of all kinds: mysteries, adventure, classics, mythology, historicals. In the summer, we spent hours and hours reading or going to the library (where there was air conditioning as a bonus!).

My parents made sure we had magazines and newspapers, too, and whether we liked listening or not, our relatives were forever talking about politics and what was going on in the world. I can see now how critical it is for a writer to keep abreast of all sorts of current events, not just politics, but in science and art and archeology and culture. Everything is grist for the mill of writing, even if it seems unconnected at the moment.

I was fortunate to have excellent English teachers from elementary through high school. We had to read Shakespeare, and we had to read good books. Hard books. We had to write, and we had to learn grammar and diagram sentences and all that obnoxious stuff that has fallen by the wayside in many schools. It has stood me in good stead.

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: JK Rowling Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince. Just started it. Don't want it to be over too fast. She is such a great storyteller and has a marvelous understanding of children.

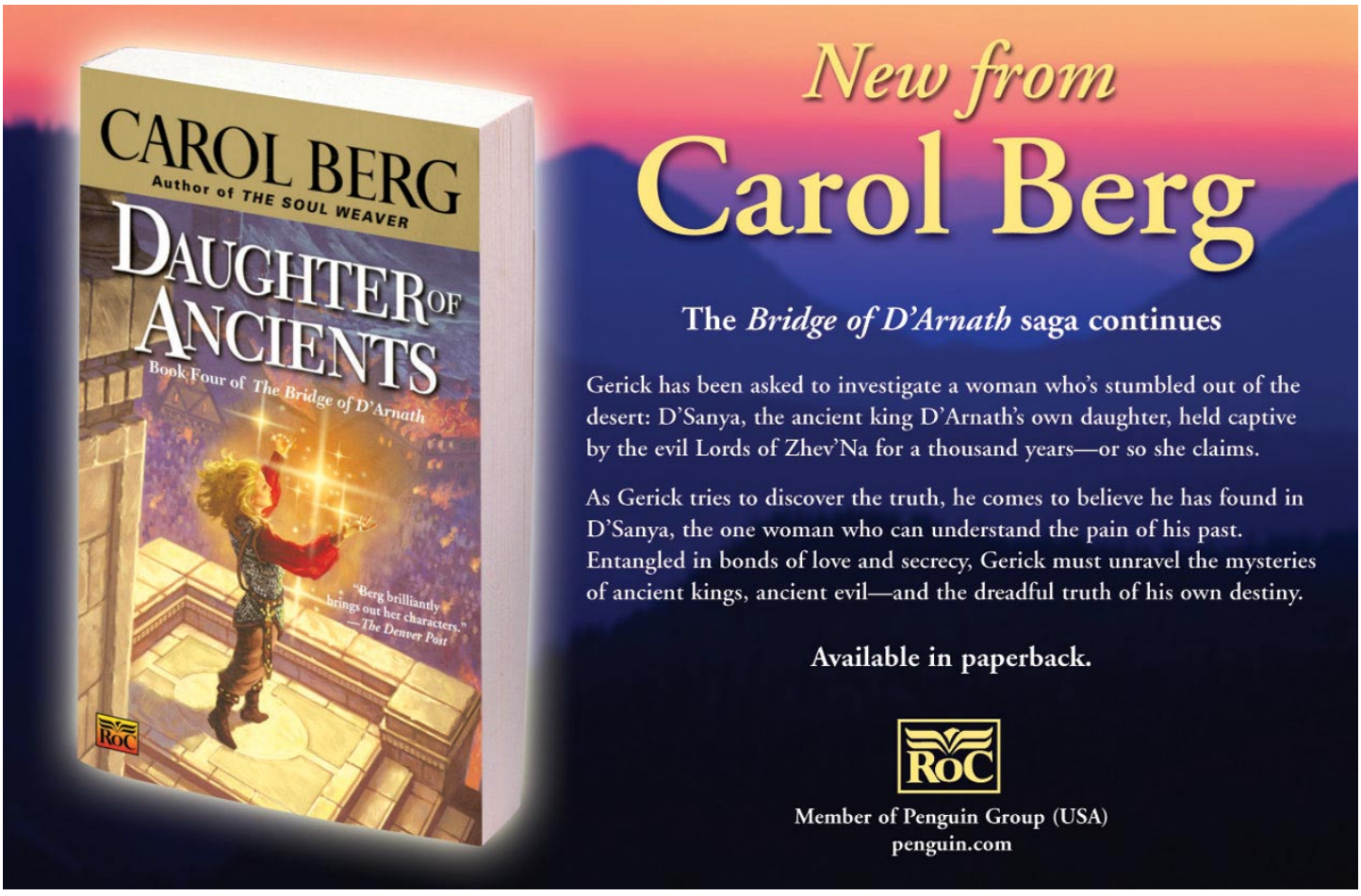
Janny Wurts Wars of Light and Shadow. I'm about halfway through the volumes of this mega-epic. Janny has the most incredible eye/ear/nose for detail and tells a compelling story to boot.

Joe Simpson & Simon Yates Touching the Void. A real life tale of adventure and survival in the mountains of South America.

One of my biggest regrets about writing is that I have less time for reading. It takes me forever to get through a book anymore. I am horribly behind on reading.

Q: How much of your time do you devote to writing?
A: 60 hours a week or more. There's never enough. I was working full time as an engineer when I wrote "Song of the Beast" and "Transformation." I am now a full time writer, but there's still not enough time to do everything I want to do.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: The story just won't leave me alone. It nags and twitches in my head. The characters demand to know their fate. And I want to know how it all comes out. I have to sit down and work it out.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Patrick Turner

Artist Patrick Turner started his career as a freelance illustrator and graphic designer, having been formally trained in traditional art techniques in Vancouver, BC. Now, some 20 years later (and still a freelance illustrator and graphic designer—technically, he's completely unemployable), his art can be seen on software covers, book covers and in corporate and private collections.

Science fiction art and book covers: http://ptstudios.tripod.com.

Fantasy art can be seen at: http://ptstudios.tripod.com/fineart.html.

Commercial art: http://ww.patrickturner.com.

Blackthorn

By E. J. Hayes

It's a cruel thing, waiting for revenge.

As the years pass, the sharp edges on your hate are rubbed smooth, and gradually, in your heart, you stop expecting today to be the day.

But take some advice from an old campaigner—keep acting as if that's exactly what you expect.

Because opportunity never knocks.

He climbs in through the window, and creeps up on you with a blackjack in his hand. When he does, you'd better be ready.

This is the story of how I wasted my chance. The story of how I stood there with my back turned, and let opportunity whack me over the back of the head.

Yesterday started like any other day, only worse. You'd think that after all these years, I'd know better than to argue with Captain Marl. But every now and then, I look at his stupid, smug face and I just can't keep my mouth shut.

Yesterday started like any other day, only worse. You'd think that after all these years, I'd know better than to argue with Captain Marl. But every now and then, I look at his stupid, smug face and I just can't keep my mouth shut.

To start with, he wasn't going to let me go. As if I hadn't done all the work to set it up in the first place. I knew he was doing it to spite me, but I couldn't keep quiet. Like an idiot, I told him what I thought, and got a filthy piece of his mind for my trouble. And then, when he changed his mind, he had the hide to make it sound like he was doing me a favour.

This was the sort of rubbish I put up with every day.

You would think any self-respecting woman would have found another job. But I'd been in the City Watch for too long to start doing an honest day's work now. And when Marl wanted something as badly as he wanted this upstart Blackthorn, junior officers didn't say no.

Besides, I needed to keep close. If you're not at home when opportunity breaks in, he'll just steal everything you own and take off into the night.

So here I was, in this dingy excuse for a pub, my life expectancy growing shorter by the minute. If anyone had asked for my opinion, I'd have said that doing business here was a stupid idea. It was the kind of joint where everyone went in pairs, especially the Watch. This wasn't friendly territory. These traders would slit our throats before they'd pay us off like the Iskrians did.

Not an ideal situation for keeping the public peace, that's for sure. But it had been a long time since anyone in the Watch cared a spit for that.

Raif and I sat down, and the belt of throwing knives shifted uncomfortably over my shoulder. I didn't like leaving my sword behind—but we were supposed to be Tyrians, and Tyrians don't carry longswords.

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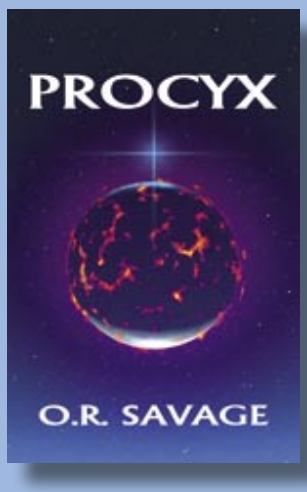

Procyx appeared at the edge of the Galaxy, just as ancient Mhyrnian texts had predicted. To scientists it was a fascinating anomaly, for it seemed to be a star that shone in only one color–a single frequency of pure, blue light. But then nearby worlds began to crumble, spinning into fiery deaths while their suns exploded or smothered out in a dreadful finality called Hypermotility. Humanity's only hope lay in the Vanguards, mythical vessels of irresistible power. Yet it seemed these wondrous ships of light were only myths. Meanwhile, centuries passed. More and more star systems died and nothing could be done to stop the spread of Procyx's cancerous ruin . . . unless the Mhyrnians had an answer for this too . . .

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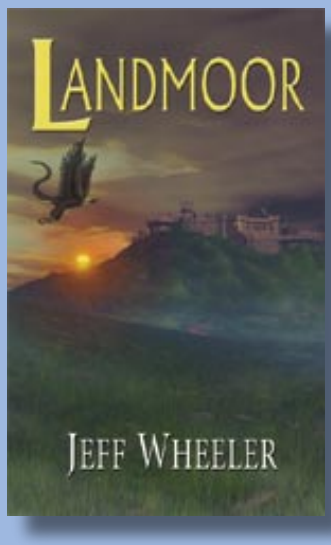

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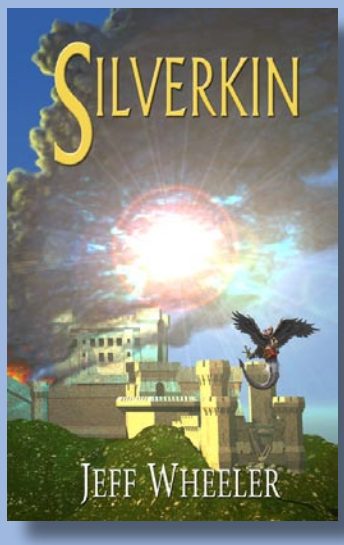

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AMBERLIN BOOKS

Continued from Issue 39

Shadowloom

By Mark Reeder

Chapter Sixteen

I studied Graymalkin as he sat on that stool, Tintagel's ruins rising behind him like a wounded dark bird, and I realized I had no reference, no means of knowing if his story were true. Given my family's inclination for dissembling, I had to assume he'd left out some of the facts. Still, his description of the Enion tapestry, particularly Adella, matched my dreams, and that, at least, was one thing in favor of his telling the truth. Yet, the overall deception by him and his siblings vexed me and wasn't something I was willing to let go. I felt the blood soar to my face, and I asked heatedly, "Why not tell me the truth from the beginning, instead of constructing this elaborate ruse?"

"Macbeth hoped that with me posing as your father, you would do as I said." Graymalkin cocked his head to one side and his eyes narrowed. "But that's not the question you should be asking."

"And what would that be?"

"Could we rely on someone else where the Shuttle was concerned? We've lived as shades of humanity for years. None of us wanted to take the chance that you would refuse to help us or that you might sell us out."

"I see." I stood and paced the length of the room. I was forced to agree with their reasoning. I wouldn't entrust the Shuttle to anyone else either.

I nodded. This was my cue to be on my way to my meeting with Artemis. But I had one more question. "Will the shuttle really restore my memories?"

"And Morgan; what happened to her?" I asked, when I stood once more in front of Gareth.

His eyes grew wide and he shook his head.

"She was supposed to stay with you the whole time. Why?"

"She disappeared after my fight with the griffin. None of the soldiers I sent after her have been able to find her."

Graymalkin's neck turned purple. "That's not what we planned!" he hissed. With an effort he controlled himself. But under the harsh red glare of the fire, I could see that he barely held himself together. Sweat drenched his face, and the nervous tick had returned, causing the left eye to jump spastically in its socket. His muscles twitched violently as though he battled to keep himself from ripping his body in two.

"I can't keep myself rational much longer," he squeaked.

I nodded. This was my cue to be on my way to my meeting with Artemis. But I had one more question. "Will the shuttle really restore my memories?"

"I don't know for certain. Maybe if you held the Ixtlan Shuttle and walked through the Umbra, your amnesia would be healed. No one can know for certain."

The perfect answer, the cynical part of me said. Had he glibly replied yes, I would not have trusted him. But his speculation left open the realm of the possible and at the same time made

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Hallowed Hunt
By Lois McMaster Bujold

After leaving her space opera masterpiece, the Vorkosigan saga, three years ago, Bujold turned to fantasy with *The Curse of Chalion* and Hugo-winner *Paladin of Souls*. Her third novel set in the Chalion world takes up the story of a man who since boyhood has shared his soul with a wolf's ghost. Ingrey's father had persuaded a temple sorcerer to perform the rite once widespread in the Weald but a capital offense since the Darthacan Empire imposed on the Old Wealdings its brand of worshipping the five gods. Ingrey never learned why—the procedure was botched, his father died, the sorcerer vanished, and Ingrey himself went mad. Only by fierce struggle did he regain his sanity and learn to suppress the wolf. His inheritance lost, he wandered for years before ending up an agent of the Sealmaster to the Weald's Hallow King, trusted to handle sensitive tasks with a combination of intimidation and finesse.

When his latest mission sends him to an isolated mountain castle to retrieve the madder-, saffron-, and woad-smeared corpse of a younger son of the king, he discovers that though many things changed in the Weald under Darthacan domination and after it recovered independence—semi-barbarous tribes are now settled, civilized orthodox Quintarians; Hallowed King is thought little more than a title—old traditions are neither wholly submerged, nor Ingrey's father the sole modern dabbler in ancient rites. In addition to the body, Ingrey must get the murderess—a woman the prince had attempted to rape in his ceremony—back to Easthome for her trial and probable execution. He sympathizes with the Lady Ijada—for she obviously acted in self-defense—though he is impatient with her stubborn faith in the judicial system. There is one further complication: she too now bears a spirit animal. From a deceptively simple beginning, deeper roots and farther-reaching consequences come to light. A dense and intricate knot of a plot emerges, and you can hardly tear yourself away until all the mysteries, complications, and connections unravel.

Bujold is one of the best crafters of stories in the genre—her writing is sharp, the pace crisp, the story rooted in its characters but big enough to work with several hundred years of history and divine intervention. Her worldview is reassuring—people act and react about the way I expect reasonable people to. The good guys are cool, competent, and likeable (from, in this case, our charming yet dangerous protagonist to the pirate captain with a pet polar bear), and the bad guys have understandable reasons for doing nasty things. I find this appealing, but it and the fact that these characters haven't had space to develop over a series are responsible for The Hallowed Hunt's only significant flaw: internal growth is skimped. The only character here who really managed to arouse my speculation—what would it be like to be this person?—was the villain, and it is likely the villain that I will remember best.

Possible objectionable material: Description of an attempted rape and successful homicide; cruelty to animals.

(Reviewed by Ida Clinkscales)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

The Shadow Within

By Karen Hancock

The Shadow Within, second installment of the Legend of the Guardian King Series, picks up five years after the original novel. We are immediately thrown into the action as Prince Abramm Kalladorne of Kiriath returns to his homeland after spending six years in captivity. For those who haven't read the first novel, I won't go into too much detail, suffice it to say that our hero overcame a Joseph-like imprisonment, before rising to become a gladiator and then savior of a foreign nation. So far, so fantasy. However, the first book introduced a world populated by interesting characters and real conflicts that kept you reading. This second book, though, takes the good points of that first book and flies with them.

As this book opens, Abramm is on a ship, returning home to fight against a kraggin, a sea monster very reminiscent of Moby Dick. Abramm's slaying of this monster secures his position on the throne, a position currently occupied by his rather hateful brother Gillard. It also forces him to use the magical powers he has, magical powers that to his people signal him as part of the dangerous Mataio sect.

As you can imagine, Abramm's return – changed from a rather spineless boy into a powerful leader – sets into motion a whole array of plots and counter plots, betrayals, intrigues, assassination attempts, brotherly feuds and a shifting tapestry of loyalties and alliances. That is counting without the presence of a princess who forms an unlikely romance with Abramm, but one that is refreshingly based on personality rather than certain other "attributes."

Hancock manages a fantastic balance of action along with some of the best character interactions I have read in a long time. She juggles some very complex political plots, always keeping the reader guessing. It reminded me of George R.R. Martin in a way, how she juggles all of the political machinations and makes them interesting.

At the same time, Ms. Hancock maintains a very emotional inner spiritual battle within our main character. Abramm must learn that the only way he can succeed is to allow himself to be directed by Eidon (God) and give his destiny up to him. Hancock again very astutely juggles her obvious religious beliefs in a way that makes them shine if you happen to share her sensibilities, but also just seem an integral part of the story if you don't. They are never jarring, or at least I never found them to be so.

Her characters are three-dimensional people, with problems of their own, and internal struggles that must be resolved. She writes women especially well, the character of Abramm's sister, as well as that of the aforementioned love interest, standing out in my mind even now.

One of the criticisms of the first book was that the world didn't seem fully developed. This isn't a problem here, not because Ms. Hancock has developed it any further, but rather because this novel draws a lot closer to home. The action all occurs within or around the city of Kiriath. And Ms. Hancock pulls this off admirably, keeping the reader's interest despite what some readers may see as a slow beginning. Trust me, the battle and decision made at the end, as well as the very harrowing and dramatic scene where Abramm must track down the creature who is slowly picking off his people one by one, make the wait and the set-up worth it.

All in all, I cannot recommend this more strongly. It isn't a ground-breaking fantasy novel, nor a ground-breaking allegory. But it is well written, has engaging characters and really plays with your emotions towards the end. Which isn't something that can be said for a lot of books. This one really leaves you feeling lifted and heartened.

Possible objectionable material: Some sexual content, but always "off-camera" and implied; some violence; some creatures that could be scary for younger children; some harrowing scenes that would be unsuitable for younger children

(Reviewed by Joel Brown)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

Son of Avonar

By Carol Berg

In the world of the Four Realms, sorcery is a crime worthy of a horrible death. There is no toleration, not from king nor priests, to those who practice it. Yet despite the persecution, those of the race called J'Ettanne continue to use their magical gifts. They cannot live without releasing their inherent magical energy, an energy so powerful that it can bring a dead man back alive again or cure mortal wounds.

Son of Avonar is the story of Seri, a noblewoman whose marriage to a benevolent and loving J'Ettane dooms them both. Though exiled from her home, she finds the hard life of a peasant preferable to living amongst the royalty who killed her husband and murdered her newborn baby. She endures the hardships of her newfound life for a decade, wondering if there will ever be another spark of happiness in her life. The events of her life change drastically when she comes face to face with a naked man thrashing through the woods—a man with no memory, no speech, someone clearly hunted by sinister forces. Against her better judgment, she chooses to help him recover these things he has lost.

The road of the man, Prince D'Nathiel, is shrouded in mystery. Even when his gift of speech is restored, he has no memory to guide him on his quest—to cross the Bridge of D'Arnath back to his own world, a world where sorcery is embraced yet rife with civil war and powerful enemies. Seri must help him find the hidden bridge, aided only by a neighboring peasant, a young boy with a gimp leg, and the Prince's clueless guide who knows nothing until the magic of his prince commands him. Their steps are harried by soldiers of the king and evil Zhid disguised as priests from the Four Realms, and the local sheriff who is bound by his oath and office to maintain the terms of her parole. As they discover the clues that will lead them to the bridge of D'Arnath, Seri begins to realize how it was more than chance that led the prince to her woods.

Carol Berg has spun a wonderfully gripping epic fantasy tale. Written in first person from Seri's point of view, the story begins with two segmented tales. The first involves her discovery of D'Nathiel. The secondary story is a series of flashbacks which help the reader understand Seri's royal background and the tragic events that culminated in her husband's downfall. Berg has been praised for her acumen of developing characters, and I could not agree more. She truly has a gift of endowing all her characters with life to make them believably human and real. The story was rich and compelling, the magic system of the J'Ettane unique and creative, and the plotline crisp and moving. The story occasionally plodded at times and there were moments when the tension began to ebb, but overall, it was a delightful, entertaining read. A rare find.

Possible objectionable material: When Seri first meets D'Nathiel, he has lost everything, including his clothing, but the nudity is non-sexual. There are moments of graphic violence, especially the descriptions of torture and execution, but it was not over the top.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

Book Review: Fantasy

Myths and Legends of the British Isles

By Richard Barber

Intermingled with the historical Britain is the magic of her legendary past. Using the voices of several source authors, Richard Barber recreates the minstrel's role for his massive, nearly 600-page tome. Along with the complete works of Shakespeare, this reference work should be part of every English-speaking, fantasy writer's library.

Barber revisits the tale of the earliest inhabitants, giants born of outcast princess Albina and her sisters, fathered by incubi. Britain was then Albion, and sat on the westernmost edge of the known world. To early

continued on next page

Romans, Brittia was the destination for independent Frankish coastal villagers in ferrying the souls of the dead. Saturn, god of Time, was said to dwell in exile on one of these remote isles.

Later myths invoke Biblical and Trojan origins, not only for Albina, but for Scota, founder of Scotland, and Brutus, Albion's conqueror. Long after their supposed extermination, giants still figured prominently in Welsh Arthurian legends, one of which features Arthur and his knights aiding his cousin, Culhwch, in wooing Olwen, a giant's daughter. Wales is also the source for the tragedy of King Lear. Anglo-Saxon kings traced their lineage from the Norse god, Woden; the wily Saxons, Hengist and Horsa, managed to invade in the guise of abetting order in the Briton Vortigern's kingdom. The Saxons' own conflict, in turn, with Norman might is revealed in tales like those of Hereward the Wake.

Barber fills his pages with the clash of arms, the sweetness of honorable chivalry, and the poetry of high adventure. Betrayal and triumph pervade the stories of Beowulf the Geat, Ireland's Cuchulain and Prince Hamlet. Beyond these tales, the myth of Havelok the Dane explores the realities of the Danish occupation.

Christian influence is found in the lives of the nobles and saints, from Merlin, who went mad, to Saint Brendan, who sailed to Paradise, to Saint Cadog, a king's son who became a monk and tamed a giant, and others of equal note. Here magic and miracles intertwine with some truly delightful results.

Among the more romantic heroes, Robin Hood and Richard the Lion Heart are joined by a gallant host of lesser known folk, who prove equally interesting. The rhymed excerpt of Robin Hood's valorous deeds is also humorous. Villains like Macbeth provide vivid contrast. Ladies soften the colorful exploits of their knights. Among these is not only Arthur's Guinevere, but also Queen Helena, finder of the true cross, and Lady Godiva, who successfully protested the heavy taxes her lord levied on Coventry.

An index of persons and places follows the triumphant closing poem (from King Edward III) by William Blake, one of the best pieces in the book. The index includes animals and weapons, but refers the reader to chapters and not to particular pages. The rendering of Welsh is also a difficult impediment to oral presentation. Because of the huge amount of material, this book will prove a difficult read for youngsters. The content, however, will not deter the avid fantasy lover if taken in small enough bites. For the most part, the complexity makes Barber's more a work for those in college or graduate school. Thus, the discriminating reader looking for entertainment only may not rate it as highly as it might deserve from a technical standpoint.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by A.M. Stickel)

Book Review: Science Fiction
The Skinner
By Neal Asher

Spatterjay is a dangerous place. If the man-eating leeches—some that grow as large as school buses—don't get you, one of the other hyper-carnivorous creatures certainly will. Most of the planet is covered by vast oceans, but it is no tropical vacation spot. Almost every creature is a predator and all of them are hungry. Stick your foot in the water there and you'll likely come back with only a stump. But there is a silver lining (depending on your perspective). If one of the leeches bites you, it'll inject a virus into your system that effectively makes you immortal as it grants you a remarkable capability to heal injuries. But watch out. The leeches do that for one reason: So that you won't die while they're feeding on you. Get caught in a swarm of leeches and you'll likely spend the next thousand years in an endless cycle of agony and torment as you become a perpetual food factory for them.

Spatterjay's human population, known as Hoopers, have lived for hundreds of years, sailing the planet's oceans in large galleons, hunting the dozens of exotic creatures that constantly attempt to return the favor. The oldest of these Hoopers, referred to as the Old Captains, are nearly indestructible, but still live a life of constant danger. The planet itself is administered by

continued on next page

a sentient artificial intelligence, known as the Warden, who employs a series of subminds (or SMs) that roam the planet in robotic bodies to keep the peace.

Into this exotic locale come three individuals: Sable Keech, a sort of galactic super-cop who has been dead for hundreds of years, but who is still walking around in a state of continued animation known as *reification*; Erlin Tazer, who was made immortal on Spatterjay many years ago, but has returned to chase down some personal demons; and Janer, a seasoned traveler who works for a collective of sentient hornets, known as the hive-mind. All have come to Spatterjay for their own reasons, but once there, they are thrown together in a great adventure that ultimately consumes the entire planet in a climatic conflict.

All of this is brought to bear in Neal Asher's terrific sophomore novel, entitled 'The Skinner'. Asher introduces all the wonders of Spatterjay to readers, wrapped in a fast-paced adventure that raises lots of interesting "big picture" questions as it piles on the action. I enjoyed the book quite a bit. The ecosystem that Asher has created is simply fantastic, with a level of detail that would impress many biologists, without ever descending into a coma-inducing academic sludge. The characters in the book were numerous, but all were rendered in convincing terms. The plot was never inordinately complex, but held plenty of surprises as I got further into the narrative, with an ending that was very satisfying.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of the book was the underlying "conversation" that Asher seems to have with the reader about the concept of immortality and what that really means. Several of the characters are effectively immortal (including several of the villains), but all ultimately have to come to grips with that before the end of the book. Another pleasant surprise was how well Asher deals with characterization of the Warden and his subminds, all of which are in truth computer intelligences, but Asher treats them as real characters, giving them plenty of stage time. One of the most independent SMs, called Sniper, was ultimately my favorite character from the book.

The one aspect of 'The Skinner' that prevents me from recommending the book to everyone is its level of violence. Spatterjay is a very violent place, and Asher does a great job capturing the environment in vivid terms. I never found the violence to be gratuitous, but it is pervasive. In the end, this is definitely not a book for the squeamish. But then again, a lot of what you can see on *The Discovery Channel* isn't either. Even with the violence, I highly recommend 'The Skinner'. I'm confident that it will end up being one of the best books I'll read all year.

Possible objectionable material: occasional strong language, intense violence, and a few references to torture and sexuality. A lot of the violence involves predators attacking prey in natural settings, but the book does involve plenty of conflict between Hoopers that are extremely hard to kill. Thus, the level of violence is a little graphic at times, although never gratuitous.

(Reviewed by Mike Loos)

continued from page 5

He studied the flame for a few seconds more before extinguishing the light.

Alexander placed his hand on the ragged terrain. "I'll do my best, Gothar. Peace with thee."

He scrambled back up the mountainside, pausing near the top to listen—a rummaging rodent in the underbrush, a soft breeze shifting ancient trees. The Dalph threat he'd sensed earlier was gone.

Satisfied that the surrounding wilderness was free of danger, Alexander crept through fallen leaves and thistles, following an almost imperceptible smell of wood smoke.

Even filled with possibility, the familiar glow of campfire offered little comfort.

Greeted by anxious eyes and murmuring voices, Alexander gathered few of the other scouts had returned. On top of that, the only remaining elder nibbled on a piece of salted deer meat and frowned at the fire. Oblivious to anything surrounding him, too occupied with his own concerns to offer his people comfort or leadership.

And yet, no one thinks to leave the sanctity of the group to search.

If his father were alive, Nathan Wintle wouldn't dare show disregard. Jonathan would have walked right up to the man, ripped the jerky from his hands and demanded acknowledgement. It would compound the rift between the council and priesthood, but it would also force action. Nothing was more stimulating to the Nalize than political/religious conflict.

Alexander wasn't quite as blunt as his father was, but he had his own means of drawing attention. He dumped his gear outside the fire circle and sat directly across from the man—a position of opposition.

"I am in need of volunteers," he said loudly, addressing the group but keeping his eyes fixed on Nathan.

The elder glared from across the fire. "To do what? If I remember correctly, your father asked the same question nearly two years ago. We still await his triumphant return."

Alexander ignored the challenge in Nathan's voice. Quarrelling with the man served little purpose. He kept his voice unyielding yet persuasive, a sultry voice of reason. "I wish to gather moonstones from Mt. Tolphyn."

All other conversations ended with the utterance of that single, devastating word.

"There are reasons why we abandoned it," Nathan said, spacing out the words as if he was talking to a child. "The only good moonstone would serve is to take us out of our misery before the Dalph arrive and slit our throats."

"With that belief, why don't you go and offer our services to mine the ores for them? I'm sure they'd appreciate your efforts in stopping the war and gifting them with an able-bodied work force."

For Alexander to make such a public insult was social suicide but when he saw Nathan's typical cool exterior crumble beneath a flush of red fury, he could have jumped for joy. Nathan's inner fire had simply been waiting for a spark.

The elder was on his feet, hands clenched tight at his sides. "Being the son of an addlebrained priest, I doubt you have the wits to realize that there's no safe way to transport moonstone. Our ancestors learned the hard way, and I will not dishonour their memory by sacrificing their descendants in a plan that will fail."

Alexander remained sitting, outwardly calm. He was conscious of the group surrounding them, listening intently. "The stone is only dangerous under direct moonlight. There's little to fear if we collect them in the morning sun. With our weapon in hand, we can place stones in

areas that will do the most damage."

He threw a pinecone into the fire and watched it burn. "And once the light from the moon hits . . ."

Nathan stared at the fizzling cone. "Who would ever agree to that?"

"I'll go," Alexander said, smiling ruefully as he turned his attention outward.

It was strange when the eyes that solicitously fixed on them during their argument turned aside so quickly. That they didn't trust his judgment was a slap in the face. Especially since his family had been a root of their faith for generations.

They would have followed Jonathan Samuel without question, he thought bitterly. But his father, as well as the other priests, had long abandoned them to fate.

There was movement to the left. The circle surrounding the fire pit broke apart to allow Abner Scott passage. He was a rough looking man with wild grey hair and pinched features. He captured Alexander's hand, holding tight.

"For Gothar's Mountains," Abner said.

Nathan's mouth opened and closed in astonishment. "You're both mad!"

Two other men standing on the sidelines approached and laid their hands overtop. Earl Shuler and Sydney Portsmouth, men of honour, men of family, men of Nalize. Earl was adept at making tools from rock, while Sydney, too young yet to pick a trade, showed immense skill with woodcarving. His pieces once found themselves in the homes of the most influential members of Nalize society.

Finally, Keith Mare stepped forward, pulling out of his wife's restraining hand. She bowed her head and stifled a sob when he placed a hand over the others.

Nathan pulled Alexander apart from the group. The elder seemed oblivious to everything, including the angry eyes now focused on him. They couldn't believe Nathan would yield his position and let them go.

"When will you leave?" Nathan's voice was uncharacteristically weak.

"As soon as possible. We have to move quickly and stop their advance."

"Do you realize what you risk with this mission?" Nathan looked pointedly at Abner, who was stuffing sweet bread into a rucksack. "Even though he turned away from the faith, there are few alive who still remember the tales of old. If we lose you both…"

Alexander understood the man's discomfort. Should both he and Abner die, power over the Nalize people would automatically shift to the council. Decisions made wouldn't have to hold with the teachings of Gothar. Though the Elders believed in his existence, their wants and desires for the Nalize followed different philosophies—like bartering possibilities with other cultures or using new agriculture and agrarian development despite the changes it might cause to the surrounding environment. But there were worse possibilities to consider should the Dalph take full ownership of the land.

"It doesn't matter anymore," he said quietly. "Your sole duty is to keep our people alive. I must take what Gothar has given me—a chance, however dangerous the path."

Alexander lowered his voice, moved a step closer. "But take care, Nathan. I've sensed Dalph nearby. You must move our people…discreetly. It won't help matters if you cause widespread panic. "

Nathan closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he seemed smaller. "Are you sure of this?"

Alexander nodded, acutely aware of the weight of the other man's burden.

The man looked uncomfortable, resigned. "I wanted to wait to give you this, but

considering things now…"

Nathan reached into his jacket, pulled out a thin gold chain and settled it around Alexander's neck. "Jonathan wanted you to have this when I deemed you ready. I wish you luck on this journey, young priest." A wry smile twisted the older man's features. "Perhaps you will become the man your father wished."

Not sure what to think, Alexander waited until Nathan returned to his place at the campfire before lifting up the garnet pendant for study. Traditionally, every Nalizeman carried a piece of garnet jewelry. It represented their service to the mountains. But to wear such an intricate talisman was to be a leader of the people.

Aware of the new weight around his neck, Alexander turned to the four men standing nearby, each already laden with supplies. Nathan said nothing when he went to the fire to retrieve his rucksack and lantern. The elder seemed awash in his own misery.

There were no calls of merriment or good fortune when they left the camp and headed west. Only the pops and cracks from the fire and the gentle weeping of Keith's wife sent them on their way.

Alexander led the men through dense brush, flooded grounds and darkened forests that hid not only Dalph sentry guards, but other dangerous animals indigenous to the central mountains. The sharom wolf population had grown steadily in recent years, though they rarely ventured near Nalize settlements. Unfortunately, their task forced them to follow the ancient roadways that led straight into the wolf heartland.

They'd traveled only a few hours when the eerie howl of a wolf filled their ears.

They froze, hopeful that the threat would pass. A scream followed startled shouts from a short distance away. Alexander tried to stifle a shiver of fear. Even in their distortion, the cries were recognizable as human.

He lifted a hand to indicate the other men remain hidden.

Careful to avoid dried twig and leaf, Alexander moved ahead. Owls were sending mournful warnings to their nearby kin, while bats swung and swooped in the foliage overhead. The quiet grace of a tracker kept his steps silent as he wove carefully between the trees toward the raised voices.

Then, almost as quickly as the commotion started, the screaming stopped.

Back braced against a well-rounded tree, he counted to ten and then looked into the clearing. The breath caught in his throat.

In the middle of the road, a large sharom wolf snarled at its kill.

Alexander had never been close enough to notice the powerful muscles beneath a thick coat of black fur; never been close enough to smell the carnage of a fresh kill. Blood of thousands had fallen from the clenched jaws of its kind, wrapping around the soft throats of interfering men and beasts.

Guilt-ridden relief surged through him when he noticed the abandoned steel helm decorated with red plumes. The unfortunate victims were Dalph, not one of the missing Nalize scouts.

As if sensing company, the wolf's ears twitched and then swiveled around. The great black head followed, revealing two brilliant balls of green.

Alexander staggered back, not from fear but amazement as he saw intelligence swirling in its eyes. The creature bared its teeth in challenge, took a step forward and then stopped dead. It sniffed the air once, twice. The large black head tilted to one side, cocked in a way that was

almost human. They stared at each other, as if trying to sort out what the other was thinking.

After a moment, it blinked as if coming out of a daze. With one final dismissive glance at Alexander, the wolf turned away and dragged its kills into the waiting darkness.

Alexander sat in the dirt, numb. He couldn't believe he'd just met a wolf… and lived! He jolted again, when a cold hand touched his shoulder. It was Abner, eyebrows raised, silently asking if they could continue.

"Did you see it?" Alexander rasped, finding his voice.

Abner frowned. "What are you talking about? Nothing's here."

Alexander shook his head, deciding silence was better. They had to reach Mt. Reign by daybreak. If the others learned that sharp-toothed obstacles roamed nearby, their steps might slow. Sometimes bearing hardship alone served a greater purpose.

He led the men across the deserted road and back into the forest. Thankfully, none of them noticed the discarded steel armour or bloodstained soil.

They reached a suitable rest site just before sunrise.

The natural canopy from a century old evergreen tree provided suitable shelter for the men settling into an exhausted sleep. Alexander took the first watch and remained hopeful that the wolves would continue to hunt other game than Nalize. He didn't deny dreams of snarling white teeth and death would come. He just hoped they wouldn't become reality.

Sometime during sleep, Alexander felt something studying him. He opened his eyes but didn't dare shift position. Too many dark things sought movement for prey. Dim light poked its way through the needles, the last dregs from the afternoon sun. Soft breath and creaking wood were the only sounds. No other smells but those of the evergreen trees that had lulled him to sleep.

Deeming the area secure, he sat up and looked around to identify his watcher.

Wariness gave way to mild annoyance when he saw the eyes weren't the hypnotic green of the wolves, but a kind black shining beneath a vat of silver hair.

Abner smiled, looked a bit sheepish. "I hope you don't mind I took Keith's watch. The poor man could barely keep his eyes open. You set a grueling pace, young Samuel."

Unsure what to say, Alexander nodded and began to rummage through his pack, searching for dried meat and water. After selecting two large pieces, he offered some to Abner who grunted his thanks. They ate in silence until he noticed a considering look in Abner's eyes. "I was wondering why you are doing this," Abner asked.

In times of life and death, honesty was important. He shrugged. "I suppose I was getting tired of hiding. Besides, we have to fight to take back our home."

"I'm not surprised that Jonathan's son chose to lead this mission. Gothar chooses his celebrants carefully. I'm surprised it took you so long to take action, though."

For whatever reason, the words bothered him. "My mother and sister died in the raid that first scattered our people. My father disappeared soon after that, following some strange summons he refused to explain. I had some things to settle with Gothar first."

Abner leaned forward, eyes sharp despite the poor lighting. "There are times when even the most faithful of priests turn away from their calling."

They stared at one another until Abner looked away. "I knew your father better than you realize," he said quietly. "A few years before Jonathan met your mother, he and I decided to brave the wilderness and chart areas still unexplored.

"Young and inexperienced, we separated and I became lost in the inner forests. Not a day

later, Jonathan found me. Despite being hungry and cold, he led us out without hesitation." He frowned then, seeming confused. "He always had a strange connection to the land, which is why, I suppose, the priesthood called to him. Mine was never that powerful."

Alexander didn't understand how a tracker resembled an avatar. "Maybe, he was just lucky."

"Considering our current circumstances, you should realize there is no such thing as luck."

Alexander nibbled his lower lip, searching for a new topic of conversation. "Do you know how the stones came to rest on top of Mt. Tolphyn?"

"Ah." Abner sat back, ready to tell the story. "Drawn to a strange wavering glow coming from the mountain's top, the first people to survive the climb up Mt. Tolphyn returned forever changed. They told a story of a goddess who fell from her cloud and shattered into pieces on the peak below. They claimed she was Gothar's heart and the mountain god wept bitterly when learning her fate. His tears covered her body, forming a pool to guard her remains.

"When the council heard of these stones, they wanted proof but the surviving climbers refused to remove the stones, claimed they were sacred. Others believed the stories but died trying to transport the moonstone back to the village. They didn't understand it had limitations, that even the smallest granule was unstable.

"In the end, the stones were left alone but not before our people realized that even in death, a god still has power."

"What happened to those who first discovered the stones?"

Abner's smile turned crooked. "They became priests. Your line is directly descended from Aloysius Samuel, which is why you need to spend so much time out on the land. Mine descends from Emma Scott. We are supposed to be Gothar's chosen…or hers. I've never been able to tell which."

It sounded too obtuse to be true. "Surely Gothar had the power to bring her back. Why would he just leave her to rot?"

Abner shrugged. "Who understands the heart of a god?"

"Perhaps that's why Gothar never answered my pleas. Maybe I asked for help from the wrong god." Alexander leaned his head against the tree. "Does she have a name?"

"If she did, I've never heard it." Abner's gaze turned penetrating, as if he was trying to see something buried deep in Alexander. "In his later years, your father wondered the same thing. Perhaps, he left because she answered his question."

Earl shifted in his sleep, grunting loudly. Alexander reached over and woke him before the man could attract the attention of possible passers-by.

Earl sat up and rubbed his eyes roughly. He grimaced at the sap on his hands and clothes. "Hope both of you remember why we're doing this," he grumbled. "I certainly don't."

Abner hid a smile behind the flask of water.

Shaking his head, Alexander handed Earl the bag of meat without comment.

The two older men spoke of inconsequential things. Alexander didn't contribute to the conversation, though they threw welcoming glances his way. The lives of four men were a heavy burden to carry. There was no doubt he could lead them to the spring that housed the moonstones. And he knew the Dalph's main camp was located just beyond the Phara River. Whether he would be able to reach it without getting anyone killed was the concern.

Although apprehensive, Alexander finally gave the order to leave.

The two other men woke without much prodding, but he waited another half-hour before setting forth. They moved without sound, pausing only when a noise seemed out of place. The

Dalph had excellent scouts, armed with crossbows and strange devices called telescopes, making their eyes and ears worthy foes. Darkness was their only shield against detection.

They reached the base of Tolphyn Mountain just as the stars dimmed in a cloudless sky. A post tied with a soiled white cloth was the only indication of a dark and steep path winding up the mountain.

"Our people have died on this path," Sydney said quietly, his eyes wide and fearful. A streak of dirt across his cheek showed dark on his pale skin. "I wonder if their ghosts still walk …and if we will see them."

"I'm sure they recognize kin from fiend," Alexander told him softly. Then, he turned to Abner, relying on the older man's knowledge of myth and history. "How long until we reach the top?"

Abner scratched his chin. "It's short but steep. Just a couple of hours, at most."

Alexander eyed the path, overcome with doubt. He was acutely aware that the other men depended on his strength. If he showed any sign of wavering…

He took a step forward, but Keith grabbed his arm.

"Shouldn't we keep to the brush? The wolves watch game trails for fresh meat."

Abner swallowed thickly. "Don't worry. They've always avoided where we are going."

Alexander pried open Keith's hand, turning his back to the mountain. They didn't have time for indecision. "If anyone wants to leave, speak now."

No one spoke; no one dared do other than follow Alexander up the path. He figured it probably had more to do with their fear of having to fend for themselves.

The mountain was eerily quiet without the sounds of small rodents rustling in the underbrush. Not even the triumphant cries of hunting birds broke the rhythm of the steady footfalls and gasping breaths. Alexander ignored their discomfort, pushing the men relentlessly. He wasn't satisfied in their loyalty until the slope leveled off.

They walked for some time before the path opened up into a meadow blooming with wild grasses and flowers adorned with purple and white blossoms. A pond rested directly centre, surrounded by a circle of white sand too fine to belong at the top of a mountain. Steam rose where the water made contact with brisk morning air.

Almost apprehensively, the men formed a circle around the pool. They watched in amazement as the light from the stones steadily dimmed, extinguishing in accord with the moon's disappearance.

Earl pulled a set of metal tongs out from his pack and used it to lift a moonstone the size of a child's fist out of the water. "It looks like quartzite."

Sydney reached across to touch the stone before anyone could stop him. "It's already cool," he said, eyes filled with wonder.

Alexander shared a disgruntled look with Abner. All he could think was that this spring was *her* memorial; that these miraculous stones were *her* remains. The spring wasn't water at all, but the tears Gothar shed to protect his love.

Earl pulled out stone after stone until each man had four.

They wrapped them in soft cloth and placed them into their respective bags.

Once finished, Alexander pulled out his map and laid it across the ground. For a moment, all he could do was stare at its craftsmanship. This was the tool and trade of an exceptional tracker: no topography left unchecked; no game trails unmarked. Every stream, lake and hilltop delicately outlined. He frowned at the map, trying to sort through something Abner said and

what the map illustrated. Betrayal surged through him but he buried it deep. There would be time enough later.

He took a steadying breath and pointed to a spot on the map. "We all know that the Dalph are centrally located here. The Phara River is adjacent. Dense forest and steep cliffs protect the other side. Sydney will take out the livestock. Abner, since you have the most experience rock climbing, you will aim for food storage. Keith will take water supply, while Earl and I destroy the barracks."

Sydney's eyes remained fixed, unwavering, on the map. "How much time will we have to escape once the stones react to the moon's light?"

"According to the stories only a few minutes. The explosion radius is quite wide, so positioning doesn't have to be exact." Alexander's eyes hardened. "And whatever remains intact will *burn*."

Abner slapped Sydney on the back good-naturedly. "So let's hope Gothar brings each of us home. I'd hate to survive in a world without a set of nicely carved wooden cabinets."

Keith glanced up at the steadily clouding sky. "What happens if it's overcast tonight?"

"That's why the stones must be placed properly, and inconspicuously, until the moon can reveal itself." Alexander pressed his left fist against his heart. "No longer can we allow the Dalph to defile Gothar's mountains."

The other men pounded their chests twice in response before turning to head back down the mountain. Alexander carefully refolded the map, placing it gently into the folds of his shirt. He didn't dare look to his left where Abner waited patiently, watching him.

"Something bothering you, lad?"

Brushing dirt from his pants, Alexander didn't immediately respond. He started down the trail, staring straight ahead. Finally, he gathered enough courage and said, "My father marked Mt. Tolphyn as the heart of sharom wolf territory."

One bushy eyebrow rose. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

"In all the years I knew my father, he was never wrong when it came to mapping. But *you* said the wolves never come here."

"They don't," he said sharply. "Your father could find his way blindfolded because he tracked using his heart. It may have taken me a few years longer, but I know this land just as well. If he says the mountain is sacred to them, then it is. If I say they don't come here, then they don't."

Alexander tried not to squirm.

Luckily for him, Sydney turned around at that moment and said, "How can anything be sacred to a wild animal?"

Abner pushed forward, muttering something about the similarities between half-wits and youth today.

Alexander kept to the rear as they journeyed back down the mountain. Thoughts tumbled over each other: stories from his past, memories of his father and the truths Abner had recently revealed. But neither the stress of the mission nor the pains of losing his family gave him the right to lash out. In the end, he swallowed his pride and apologized to Abner. The other tracker said he understood, but it didn't make Alexander feel any better.

When they reached their next resting point, he asked Abner to tell him stories of his parents. He learned how Jonathan Samuel met Aura Settler; learned how his mother had hated when Jonathan disappeared for weeks just to be alone with the land. He listened to why two childhood friends had drawn apart and why Abner had turned away from the priesthood. And he

mourned when he remembered how the Dalph had ripped his family to pieces.

It took two hard days of travel to reach the Phara River. Keith, albeit nervous to be the first to leave, would follow the east bank for a few miles until coming across a patch of larch trees. There he would have to cut cross-country until he reached the first of three wells, sacred places cut from stone. The rest of the group crossed the river, moving to circle around from the south.

Before long, the lingering stench of livestock overcame them. Sydney had a difficult time climbing over the fence designed to stop wolves and mountain cats. He landed on the other side in an undignified heap. His eyes were bright with fear when he said his goodbyes but his resolve never faltered when he crawled and disappeared into untended grasses.

Barely an hour later, Abner, Earl and Alexander stood at yet another crossroad.

In the week they'd been gone, Alexander had come to depend on the tracker's council. Though Earl's dry sense of humour made for shorter nights and cheerful conversation, he wanted Abner's solid presence at his side. Times like these called for difficult, and sometimes, unwanted choices.

Even in the best shape, Earl could never scale the sheer cliff face to reach the overhang above the food sheds. Once Abner reached the pinnacle, all he had to do was drop the stones. Of all the tasks, Dalph interference would be most negligible with that one. They would never expect an attack from that angle, thus would attribute any noise or falling debris to the high-powered winds. It wasn't a solid guarantee but it was enough for Alexander to believe Abner would survive.

The sun was low when Alexander and Earl watched the enemy camp from the shadows. Four of their targets were only a hand throw away. Unfortunately, the others proved difficult to reach if they wanted to stay inconspicuous.

Strange, Alexander thought as he watched his adversary, *that a people so alike in appearance to us could be so elegantly vicious*.

The only visible differences he could see were negligible: a slightly darker colour of skin and hair, eyes of pale blue instead of the typical Nalize hazel, green or brown. Their language was harsh and inelegant, so unlike the smooth elegant roll of the Nalize tongue.

As he studied his adversary, he had to admit that they safeguarded their camp well. He and Earl had to bypass several animal traps before reaching their current location. Large beasts roamed side-by-side with the Dalph, obviously designed to rip their adversaries to pieces. Few openings in the guards' rounds arose.

The gradual loss of sunlight was a harsh reminder while the smell of rain made him nervous. He rubbed a hand across his mouth. If it was possible for him to shift just a few yards closer, then maybe…

Alexander took the remainder of Earl's stones and signaled the man to remain hidden. He crawled as silently as he could, pausing only when a guard neared his location. But once in position, he realized just how small the window of opportunity would be. Only a second passed before he cast his first stone at a weapons building. It rolled to a stop next to the west wall. He threw two other stones toward a number of tents Dalph used as barracks.

With only one stone left, he strained his eyes to find a prospect that might take out multiple targets. It was then he noticed Earl standing half-exposed from his hiding spot, waving his arms in an attempt to attract Alexander's attention. He pointed toward two guards who were

nearing the barracks.

Alexander had barely a second to nod his acknowledgment when arrows struck Earl in the chest, neck and legs. "No!" he screamed, surging to his feet.

Earl's eyes never left Alexander's face as he toppled over.

There was no escape. He crouched low, holding the last moonstone tight against his chest. His green eyes darted from side to side as Dalph surrounded him. Pain surged when he realized Earl had sacrificed his life for no reason.

Someone shouted something from nearby.

Alexander heard the rumble of thunder overhead and felt the first drop of rain against his skin. Dalph soldiers moved in, faces menacing and triumphant. A howl came from the surrounding forest as something hit him from behind. He wondered if it had been a warning. Darkness caught him before he finished the thought.

Emptiness held him in her sway for a long time, dulling the truth of his situation. Strange voices beyond his small sphere kept him from sinking completely into oblivion. Anger at them was the bracing tonic that fuelled his climb back out of the abyss.

He moaned, opening one eye, and then the other.

At first, Alexander believed he'd gone blind, but his eyes soon focused on the thin strips of light making their way through the spaces between the boards of his prison.

He sat up slowly, mindful of his splitting head.

"You took quite a blow."

Alexander recognized the voice before he focused on the man. From the sleek dress, he obviously held a high position of rank. Odd that there were no guards to protect him, though Alexander wasn't much of a threat bound to a post. Strange that he spoke the Nalize tongue without hesitation. An educated man then, which also made him a dangerous one.

"Do you know where you are?"

Alexander looked around the room. There wasn't much to see but a single door inconveniently located behind the man's chair. "Am I still in the camp?"

"My men dragged you in here a few hours ago, along with your precious rock." He held up the moonstone and tossed it into Alexander's lap. "Will you tell me its purpose?"

Alexander said nothing, marveling at an arrogance he had never experienced before. Was the man royalty or simply a high-ranking officer?

"You are the first to come here wielding these strange stones. I find it amusing that this is the only counter-attack we've had from your people. Surely, you have better weapons." The man reached over and ripped off his necklace. "You're too young to hold a position of power. Are you an upstart youth tired of running away from a fight?"

Alexander jumped when the man whistled sharply. A guard entered the room, moving up to flank the man in the chair. His captor spoke in another language, insisting on something that obviously bothered the guard. Finally, the guard complied and untied Alexander before grudgingly leaving the room.

The man winked at Alexander, full of good-humour as he watched his captive rub the feeling back into his wrists. "As you can see, I am the power here. General," he paused for dramatic effect, "Armand Bronson. Now, where are the rest of your men hiding?"

Alexander cleared his throat. "It was only myself, and the other man you killed."

"I highly doubt you are that stupid. Even if you don't tell me, our hounds will find their trail. They are quite efficient in their duties."

"And our wolves will kill them before they allow that to happen," he shot back without thinking.

General Armand raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying they follow your orders?"

"I'm sure you've lost several men while trying to find our hiding spot. The wolves follow the will of Gothar, as do we all. You'll learn that eventually."

The smile on General Armand's face turned nasty. "I doubt an animal cares what happens to meat. Flesh is flesh, no matter their origins."

Alexander continued to press the subject, knowing he had hit a nerve. "We've never lost a true soul to the sharom wolves. I know you can't say the same. They don't want you here. Neither do we. A common foe breeds allies, no matter their species."

The General shot up from the chair, knocking it over. "No wolf would ally with a people who believe rocks are a weapon. I'll leave you to think that over while I build an empire on your sacred mountains."

The door slammed behind him; a lock slid into place.

Alexander braced his head on the wall. He wasn't sure how exactly it happened but sometime during that meeting, Alexander chose his final target. Since it seemed the Dalph followed one leader, if he took out the head, the body would fall.

They held him in that dark prison for two days.

On the first night, he'd been desperate to hear the explosion of moonstone followed by the desolate cries of dying Dalph. He doubted the General had bothered to look for other stones. And to his compounded dismay, the rain fell long and hard. It pooled beneath his feet and set a chill deep into his bones.

The general came into the room periodically, asking him questions and getting no answers. He'd ask about moonstone or the location of his people, to which Alexander responded by a simple smile that held dark secrets.

That last night, he'd been asleep when howls wove their way into his dreams. The sound brought memories of simpler times where the Nalize only gave care to what the wolves might steal from traps.

He didn't have much time to reminisce when rough hands pulled him from his slumber, dragged him from the prison and into cool night air. He blinked sleepily up at clouds spreading wide across the sky, coming fully awake when he realized the rain had stopped falling.

The whole camp seemed alive with movement. Soldiers dashed into the darkness, moving after something too quick to identify. His captors propelled him forward until he stood before a set of stairs leading up to a hut built on stilts. He eyed the area where Earl had died. The body was gone, taken only Gothar knew where.

General Armand descended the stairs too quickly, almost slipping in his haste.

He glared at Alexander with such contempt it erradicated his once jovial attitude. "Call off your beasts!"

Alexander remained a counterpoint to the General's impotent rage. He'd played this role only a week before. Strange that so short a time seemed like forever. "They aren't mine to command."

"Liar! They butcher my men without thought."

Alexander didn't stop to think. "I believe it was you who said they were simply animals."

There was a flash of gold and Alexander was on his knees, reeling from a kick to his stomach. Another blow to his head and the world spun off axis. His arms strained against the

men holding him. He wheezed for breath.

A dark shape sprang between them, knocking the guards backward with its rush.

Alexander landed hard on the ground. Mouth and nose full of dirt, he lifted himself up with shaking arms and watched the wolf with the glowing green eyes dispose of the guards. It snarled viciously at Armand.

The General pulled out a wicked looking blade and faced his opponent.

As they fought, Alexander rustled out his remaining piece of moonstone. When it touched his flesh, the moon inexplicably appeared.

Rising to his feet, Alexander took a step toward Armand—who was too intent on fighting off the wolf to pay attention to a man he believed cowed. The stone glowed brightly and yet brought no pain.

He stepped between wolf and man, placed a hand on the wolf's head. Soft black fur pressed in his fingers for a moment before the animal darted away, leaving Alexander face to face with the man who'd held him captive; who'd driven his people into hiding.

"Do you really want to know what this does?"

Armand's eyes opened wide, his pupils contracting from the sudden flux of light as Alexander lifted his hand. The other moonstones spread throughout the camp shook the ground with their growing power. Alexander felt nothing but the hand of Gothar resting upon him, keeping him strong.

Somewhere in the darkness, wolves howled their triumph.

Beneath the chaos of dying of men and the roar of fire, there was the soothing murmur of a woman's voice telling him her secrets; telling him the moonstone had just exploded and consumed him in its birthing light.

The End

As a graduate in the field of Earth Sciences, Robyn has always been interested in understanding the dynamics of the world and thus took the next logical step to create and explore her own realities. Her short fiction has appeared in the anthology Wicked Little Girls and is forthcoming in the anthologies The Lite Side and Fantastical Visions IV.

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isn't still around? If you believe the stories, he was immortal."

Ferriji considered. She'd often wondered this herself, but she had an answer. "I think," she said slowly, "he'd have done something, if he was. You know, about the way the world is, all these wars and dictators and everything. Like when he made everyone get together and fight the Demon Queen, and work together afterwards. There are no stories about him in modern times, so I think he must be dead."

"And what would you do," asked the old man, "if you were to meet him?"

"Well... ask him to do something." The girl thought about it, finding it difficult to put into words exactly what she wanted. "You know, make everyone work together, not fight all the time."

"Couldn't someone else do the same?"

"Not like he could," she said firmly. "He could... what's the word, make people want to do things."

"Inspire them," said the old man softly.

"Yes, *inspire* them. No-one can do it like he did."

"Like he's inspired you?" The child was silent, trying to make sense of what he was saying. "Maybe, if he's that important to you, you could try to do it for him. Do what he would, if he were here."

Something seemed to switch on inside Ferriji's head. "Maybe," she said, "I could."

The man smiled broadly. "By the way," he said, "which story is it you're reading?"

Ferriji relaxed abruptly, suddenly in an area she felt confident about. "The one where he uses his flying ship to rescue the Queen of the Midnight Sun, then magics up an army for her to retake her kingdom."

"Ah." The old man laughed. "Now, when I said the stories were *mostly* true..." His green, slitted eyes twinkled.

* * *

"Oh, Renon, what am I going to do?"

The Traveller raised his head from where it had rested on his hands and gazed into his old friend's green, slitted eyes. As usual, Renon looked amused. At one time, this had angered the Traveller, making him feel he was being mocked, but he was used to it now. It was just Renon's way.

The old man raised an eyebrow. "You've two thousand years of experience to call on," he pointed out. "Why would you need advice?"

The Traveller snorted. "I don't believe ten million years of experience would prepare me for this," he commented bitterly. "It's not like anything else I've ever done."

Renon put his head on one side, looking for all the world as if he were actually considering the possibility. "As far as I know," he said at last, "no-one's ever actually lived that long. Not even gods, let alone a mortal."

"If you can call me a mortal."

"You can die." The old man shrugged. "That makes you mortal."

"What about you?" the Traveller asked abruptly. "How long have you lived?"

"Well, that depends, doesn't it?"

"On what?"

"On whether time always goes in the same direction, of course."

The Traveller stood up and stretched, pushing his hand wearily through his long black hair. Nearly a month of fruitless talking had left dark smudges around his grey eyes and a lined, drooping look to his usually firm face. He paced restlessly around the fine room, with its rich murals and cloth-of-gold hangings. They honoured him with luxury, which he could happily do without, but they wouldn't listen to him. It was so frustrating.

It had seemed a good idea, to summon all the allies here to Errish, the heart of the rebellion against the Demon Queen. It was straightforward, as far as he could see. Everyone hated the Queen's empire, everyone wanted freedom, and everyone was willing to fight. But the delegates from several of the Lhaq Islands were arguing over where the fleet should be based, and it had been necessary to physically restrain the ambassador from Habberif from attacking his Shimethi counterpart. Everything was falling apart.

"Renon," he said, "at the right time, I enjoy this kind of conversation with you. But not now. I have an empire to defeat, and allies who seem far more eager to turn their swords on each other than to work together. This alliance seems to be disintegrating, before it's even started. What am I going to do?"

The old man took on a thoughtful air, though the mockery in his eyes hadn't entirely vanished. "There are a great number of things," he observed, "that you could try tomorrow. For this evening, I would suggest that what you should do is get drunk."

The Traveller laughed out loud. "Renon," he said, "remind me never again to say that you don't give good advice."

* * *

The views offered by the approach to Errish never failed to take Ferriji's breath away. Coming from the east, over a stretch of open sea between the last of the islands and the Isthmus, the snow-capped, cloud-wreathed spine that linked the Northland and the Southland reared higher even than the plane, now it was making its final descent. Against the gleaming towers of the greatest city in the world, the mountains serenely spoke of the power of the earth from which human achievement grew, which would remain after every city ever built was dust.

Errish claimed to be the oldest city in the world, going back ten thousand years, though few independent historians would allow it more than half that, and there were others that put themselves forward as the oldest. But none of those had maintained themselves as Errish had. Little of its history was visible, only the present. Space being at a premium on the narrow strip of lowland, the city had ruthlessly replaced and rebuilt, sending its gleaming skyscrapers soaring into the clouds and its undercity plummeting dozens of floors below the surface.

The plane came to a standstill above the airport, built out onto the water, and hovered for that moment that always made Ferriji feel it was making up its mind whether or not to descend. She wondered what would happen if it decided not to. But, of course, after that slight hesitation, the airliner settled itself slowly downwards onto its designated landing-pad.

Led away from the queuing crowds by the official reception delegation, Ferriji was hustled through a diplomatic channel and into the waiting car. Four of the delegation piled into the vehicle with her, two of them clearly bodyguards, eyes constantly moving in every direction at once. The elderly man who'd greeted her, Ladhoul ma Kharish, the host country's foreign minister, introduced a nervous-looking woman of about thirty as Enklei me Anshik, who would act as her aide during her stay.

Enklei, fashionably attired in a black silk *cherrit* that hugged torso, arms and legs, seemed

totally in awe of the severe woman, her short, iron-grey hair contrasting vividly with near-black skin, who would be her responsibility for an indefinite time. Amforli Ferriji was, after all, the most distinguished diplomat in the world, a legend of hope to many, a figure of hatred to some. This assignment could make or destroy Enklei's career.

Ferriji also felt ill at ease. Her career, too, was at stake in what would happen over the next few days. Perhaps the world wouldn't see it that way, but she knew that, if she failed now, her entire life would have been wasted. She couldn't contemplate that.

Though her schedule was busy, this evening was her own, and she got rid of the flapping Enklei and the dour minders as quickly as she tactfully could. Ferriji always insisted on not having personal bodyguards: she found it distasteful that someone else should risk their life for the decisions she'd made, good or bad.

She was aware, though, as she descended ninety-two floors to the dining room, that the entire hotel was crawling with security guards. They weren't all for her: quite a few of the delegates were staying here. But she suspected that they would be under instruction to keep the closest eye on her. She was, after all, the lynchpin of the whole exercise.

Ferriji scanned the huge room dubiously, while the maitre d' arranged a table in a well-hidden alcove, as she had requested. Quite apart from security or simple privacy, she didn't want to find herself besieged by delegates seeking an advantage over their rivals. She'd thought about ordering dinner in her suite, but there was a restlessness on her. Perhaps it was just the long flight.

Settled at last in a screened-off booth, Ferriji began to relax, sipping a sixty-year-old red wine and considering her order. Errishi cuisine wasn't the greatest in the world, but at least they recognised that and provided a variety from all six continents. She'd half-settled on a Thaal dish, when a voice cut in on her.

"Is anyone sitting here?"

"No, and I'd prefer to keep it..." she began, looking up. The voice strangled in her throat as she saw the man standing by the table. He was dressed more soberly now, as befitted his age; but the long white hair and slitted, green eyes were the same as she remembered from the Zartorin Cafe, all those years ago.

"You were more accommodating as a child," he pointed out mildly. "And I'm not even interrupting your reading, this time."

"But..." For perhaps the first time in decades, the world's greatest diplomat could think of nothing to say. Not waiting for her invitation, the old man settled himself opposite her.

"Good choice," he approved, examining the wine-bottle. "I remember the celebrations when they'd got that vintage in. They went on for days."

"I don't understand." Ferriji shook her head hard. "You haven't changed. Not at all."

"Ah." The old man looked thoughtful. "I'm not much of a one for change, you see. Things don't really change as much as they seem to."

Ferriji had her mouth open to reply, though she was unsure what she'd have said, when the maitre d' bustled up. "Ms Amforli, I'm so sorry, I'll call for security, if you..."

"It's all right," she interrupted, speaking almost automatically, "he's an old friend. Um... could you lay another place, please?"

"Certainly, certainly, madam." The man was suddenly all action, snapping his fingers for a junior waiter to attend to the matter. He looked unspeakably harassed, but Ferriji wasn't fooled: such people throve on the pressure of a great occasion. He'd doubtless be treasuring the memories for years to come.

Looking back, she saw the old man grinning. "So, I'm an old friend? I'm pleased about that."

She gave him the look that had made world leaders quail, and he scarcely blinked. "Well," she said acidly, "that's half right, at any rate. How old *are* you, for the Lady's sake?"

He grinned. "Not old enough," he suggested mildly, "to enjoy boasting about my vast age. But old enough to know how the world works. And to know the importance of what you're doing."

Ferriji arched an eyebrow. "Having dinner?"

He laughed aloud at that. "Well, as to that, there's little more important we do than eating and drinking, is there? Everything else follows from it. What are you ordering?"

She studied the menu again, although that wasn't really necessary. "I was thinking of the Thaal *sfur-hesh*. It'll go well with the wine."

"Then I'll join you. It's been a while since I've had Thaal food."

It wasn't until they'd ordered and were sipping their wine in silence that the old man asked suddenly, "So, do you still read comics about the Traveller?"

Ferriji half-choked on her drink. "Hardly. You really think I'd have had a copy of *The Traveller and the Queen of the Midnight Sun* inside my copy of the Treaty of Velarma? It would have made an interesting news item, if that had slipped out."

He examined her curiously. "So all this, the peace-treaties and the summit agreements, and this World Union plan: you're not trying to emulate the Traveller?"

"What?" This had thrown Ferriji completely: it had been a long time since she'd thought about the Traveller. "No. Well..."

"When you were ten," he reminded her gently, "you said that you were going to do what he would, if he were alive now. You'd make the different countries stop fighting and work together. Forgive me if I've misunderstood, but I was under the impression that's what you'd been doing for the past thirty years."

She tried to look away from his sardonic green eyes, but they seemed to hold her. For the first time in many years, she remembered the fire that had burnt in her when she was young, the sense that what she knew she must do was the most important thing that had ever happened to the world. Although she no longer felt like that, she recognised that it was the same fire, spread through her and acclimatised to her body, which still drove her.

And she also admitted to herself where that fire had come from: the passion she had felt, so long ago, for the ancient hero of legend. At ten years old, she had been too young for what she had felt for the Traveller to be sexual, although she'd known for a fact that, if it had been possible for them to meet, they would have been lovers. It was a desire, a need, for someone who saw the world the same as she did. Someone who could show her a map of the future and mark out a route for her.

"I suppose so," she admitted at last. "I wouldn't mind having him here now. But I doubt if he ever really existed."

The old man put his head on one side. "Why's that?"

"Oh, you know what legends are like. I suppose some parts of the legend have a bit of truth in them. But probably lots of different people did those things, and it was all woven together into one legend."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why weave all these stories into one? It seems a strange thing to do."

"Because... oh, I don't know. I suppose all the stories had something in common. A unifying idea. So they were turned into stories about a single character, who embodied that idea."

"An idea. So, not real at all. That's what you're saying?"

Ferriji knew she'd no answer for this, and she wasn't really in the mood to argue the point anyway. Who was she to deny the reality of an idea? It was an idea that she'd been pursuing all the time she was persuading, coaxing and bullying all (or almost all) the nations of the world to consider her World Union, a forum in which they could all work together, instead of fighting. As the Traveller might have done, she caught herself thinking, if he'd had the means.

Then their meals arrived, and food lightened the atmosphere. The old man (as when she was a child, it never occurred to Ferriji to ask his name) chatted lightly with her about anything and everything but world affairs. Gradually, the wine and the conversation broke down her reserve, and Ferriji found herself thoroughly enjoying his company.

Much later than she'd intended, she finally made her way back up to her room, leaning relaxed against the elevator-wall for the long ascent. She felt obscurely that she should make herself ready for tomorrow, for the meeting that could create or destroy the World Union, but she could think of nothing she could do in preparation. Her entire life had been a preparation for tomorrow, and if she wasn't ready now, she never would be.

* * *

Ferriji woke with the certain knowledge that she was going to fail. She had been dreaming: she couldn't clearly remember the dream, but it had involved the delegates falling on her and tearing her to pieces.

That wasn't going to literally happen, of course, though she thought it might almost be better if it did. They'd mock her ideal, instead, and reject it, leaving her empty of hope, empty of purpose, defeated. How could she possibly cope with that?

Her throat was hot and dry, and she got out of bed to get herself a drink of water; but her hands were trembling so badly, she almost dropped the cup. Switching on the light, she gazed at herself in the mirror, as the thought formed in her mind, *I can't do this.*

Ferriji felt the panic growing, up through her guts and into her breast, pumping her heart faster and faster. She wanted nothing so much as to run, now, this moment: to flee from the hotel, find herself a night-flight away from Errish, away from what would soon be the scene of her humiliation. But she knew she couldn't: the security people would never let her leave the hotel in the middle of the night. If she was going to get away, it would have to be in the morning, just before they came to arrange her day's schedule.

Slumping down onto one of the chairs, Ferriji put her head in her hands for a while. Then she glanced up at the clock, realising that it would be a few hours yet before she could execute her escape. She looked at the bed, but the thought of going back to sleep made her shudder. She was just going to have to pass the time.

Flicking idly through what was on the vidcast, she stopped and almost laughed aloud. A thirty-year-old film, *Destiny at Xar-Toren*. Complete trash, of course; but, insofar as it represented anything but a commercial mish-mash, it told the story of the Traveller's greatest hour, when his thousand-year plans came to fruition.

Dialling up the channel, Ferriji settled to watch, trying to forget her own problems in the old story. By the time it had finished, she had already decided that she was going to quote the

Traveller's great funeral oration in her speech tomorrow. Or was it today?

* * *

Gratefully, Ferriji flopped down into the comfortable premium-class seat, glancing out of the window to see that the plane was already preparing for its take-off. Just as she was first off on arrival, she never boarded planes until they were ready to leave. It was one of the perks of her position.

Another was that she had an entire block of seats to herself, to prevent her from being bothered during the flight. She sometimes felt a twinge of guilt about this, wondering how many other passengers she inconvenienced. Then again, she reflected, no one able to travel premium-class was likely to remain inconvenienced for long.

If the days of meetings and speeches and negotiation had been exhausting, the past few days had been even more so. It seemed as if every media reporter in the six continents had wanted to interview her, most of them today for a "last word before you leave."

In endless mass-interviews, Ferriji had received the same questions: How did she feel now that her aims were achieved? How did she see the World Union developing? Did she intend to accept the presidency? When did she plan to return to Errish (this last from the local media)? And, in endless mass-interviews, she gave more variations of *no comment* than she'd known she possessed.

She should feel elated, she knew, but what Ferriji really felt was that she'd gladly sleep for a month. But it was far from finished.

The farewells at the airport had been endless, too: official farewells from everyone in any position of authority, as well as a few that seemed to have sprung from nowhere, and a rather more personal farewell with her aide, Enklei. Once the young woman had got over trembling every time Ferriji had looked at her, she'd proved an efficient assistant, and Ferriji had ended up growing quite fond of her. If things had been different, she reflected, Enklei would have been just the age to be her daughter, and she hoped that she'd have got on with such a daughter as well as she had with this young woman. She'd request Enklei again, she decided, on her next visit. It would be pleasant, and certainly better than breaking in a new aide.

Ferriji had her eyes shut, as the plane lifted from its pad and turned out over the sparkling sea towards the Lhaq Islands. She was snoozing, when a familiar voice said, "Is anyone sitting here?"

Smiling inwardly, without opening her eyes, she said, "No, and that's how it's booked. But you're welcome."

"You don't seem surprised, this time," observed the old man, settling himself beside Ferriji.

"Not really." She opened her eyes and turned to him. "I should have been expecting you, shouldn't I? Where are you heading?"

He shrugged. "That's not a simple answer. Where are you heading?"

Ferriji snorted. "Everywhere."

"Me too." He put his head on one side. "Don't you intend to rest, now that you've achieved your aim?"

"Achieved?" She sighed. "If only. No, just because they've agreed to set up the World Union, that doesn't mean it'll succeed. If it's to be anything more than another place for politicians to argue and disagree, anything more than all talk and no action, people are going to

have to believe in it. I've got to win their hearts."

He grinned. "Seduce them, you mean?"

After a few moments trying to glare, Ferriji laughed. "I suppose so. Oh dear, I don't make a very alluring seducer, do I?"

"Oh," he said gently, "you've always been that. So, no rest then? How do you keep going?"

She shrugged. "Because I have to. Like the Traveller." She laughed at his comically raised eyebrow. "Oh yes, I've thought about him a lot these past days. I think I'd have given up, without his help. If I hadn't been thinking about how he never gave up."

"He almost did."

"What?"

"Gave up. There was one time, he came *that* close," and he held up his thumb and forefinger, almost touching, "to letting the whole alliance fall apart. Where do you think the world would have been now, if that had happened?"

She considered. "I've never heard that story before."

"It isn't well-known, but it's true."

"I think I believe you." She sighed. "So what stopped him?"

"Who knows."

They both fell silent, and Ferriji turned to look out of the window. It seemed as if the entire world was there beneath her, all in one place, as if she could have it all without travelling. "I wish I could have known him," she said, more to herself than to her companion.

"You have known him." She turned sharply to look at him. "He's been present for you all your life. His story, his ideals. How much more could you know anyone?"

"That's not what I mean." She was certain that the old man knew exactly what she meant, but she explained anyway. "Know him personally, I mean, so that he knows me too. In the present."

"Ah, the present." He looked pensive. "That idea has always intrigued me, picking out one moment by which you define the whole of time. Everything before it is the past, everything after is the future. Perhaps even non-existent. What makes that one moment any more special than any other?"

"Well..." Theoretical physics had never been her strongest subject, and the only philosophy that had interested her was ethics. "It's special because it's *here*. It's the only moment we can actually be in."

"Ah, but which moment is it? Now? Or now? Or *now*? Any moment we choose can be the present. That means that what you think of as the past could be the future."

"What are you talking about? I'm too tired for this."

He smiled gently. "Of course. Don't worry about my rambling." He glanced at his wrist. "Don't let me forget to change my watch before we land. I wouldn't want to be living in the wrong time."

* * *

"What do you think you're doing?" Renon demanded. His green eyes were as amused as always and his voice had all its usual sardonic smoothness; but it was a demand, nevertheless.

"What does it look like?" the Traveller countered. Turning, he picked up a small pile of books from a table and stuffed them into the pack he was filling.

"What it looks like is that you're running away. What I should have asked was why?"

Abruptly stopping his frenetic activity, the Traveller slumped into the nearest chair and put his head in his hands. "Because I'm exhausted," he said at last. "Because I've been working for nearly ten years to form an alliance against the Demon Queen, for *their* freedom, and all any of them want to do is quarrel among themselves. I can't do it any more, Renon. I'm going."

Without speaking, the old man sat down next to him. "Where will you go?" he asked, after a while.

"Oh... I don't know. The Northland, perhaps. It's supposed to be huge, and I'd enjoy exploring it. Provided it's a long, long way from these..." He stopped, unable to find an adequate word to describe his allies.

There was another silence for a while. "Do you know what happened today?" he asked eventually. "That man Cherrik, from Phamrizh: he told me I was just forming the alliance for my own self-aggrandisement. And only a couple of the delegates argued with him."

Renon shrugged. "You can change their minds. You're good at that."

The Traveller laughed bitterly. "Oh yes, I'm good at persuading people to believe what I want them to. That's why the alliance is in such chaos. But... maybe he's right. They all seem to think so."

"You don't really believe that," said Renon softly. "For two thousand years, you've done what you believed was right, not what would be to your advantage. That's what you're doing now. Well," he amended, his eyes sliding to the half-full pack, "until today, that is."

"Maybe." The Traveller shook his head wearily. "I've never had to do anything remotely like this. I don't believe it's even possible."

"Oh, it's possible," said Renon. He seemed to be almost speaking to himself, but the Traveller knew him too well to believe that the comment wasn't aimed directly at him. "I've known someone who's done it."

The Traveller frowned, puzzled. "I've never heard anything like that," he said, and looked suspiciously at his friend. "Is this in the past or the future?"

Renon shrugged. "That depends on where you're looking from. Does it matter?"

"I suppose not." He sighed. "I know it doesn't make any difference to you, anyway. So, this person: how did he succeed?"

"She. She succeeded because she had the right inspiration. It's a pity you can't meet her: maybe she'd be the right inspiration for you."

The Traveller stretched, leaning back in his chair. To tell the truth, he could do with one of Renon's stories, just now. "Tell me about her."

"Well," Renon began, "as a child she had a dream, that all the nations in the world could stop fighting and be brought together..."

By the time Renon had finished his story, the Traveller had already decided what he was going to say to the delegates tomorrow.

The End

Nyki was born in Canada, but has lived almost all his life in Britain, and he's been writing since he was four. A graduate from Keele University in Classics and English, Nyki has had a dozen short stories published in various magazines and anthologies, including Xenos, Sci-Fright and The Thirteenth Fontana Book of Great Horror Stories. He's had twelve stories placed in the fantasy-writers.org monthly writing challenges, four of them in first place.

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The knives were fine steel, though, which these days was worth more than your life. They were certainly worth a lot more than the life of the Tyrian I'd killed to get them. Still, I missed my sword, all the more because one of my fellow Watchkeepers—honest souls all—had likely filched her from the barracks already.

To cover my unease, I sent a black glare across the table at the scum we'd come to meet. His name was Laine, and he was fat and red and wilting in the heat. Unlikely as it seemed, he was one of Blackthorn's inner circle.

Or so rumour told.

Everyone knew something about Blackthorn, but it was never what you'd call good oil.

They had a cousin who'd fenced some gear for a guy whose brother knew Blackthorn. Or, they'd slept with a girl whose landlord once paid off a gangster who'd been offed by Blackthorn. That's the sort of thing that Marl was up against, and it had taken us a long time to get this far.

Since Marl had put me on this assignment, I'd heard all there was to hear about Blackthorn, and I didn't believe most of it.

Our latest source, though—the one who'd given us Laine—was reliable by comparison. At least, he'd suffered a lot before he gave up. You'd think that this kind of muscle would be tougher, all the same. By the time Raif dragged me off him, the guy was sobbing like a three-year-old.

"If I was Blackthorn," Raif said to me afterwards, "I'd get myself some new friends. That guy scared pretty easy."

He grinned at me, all teeth and flashing blue eyes, but his wenching didn't cut any ice with me. I gave him a glare as I wiped my dagger. I didn't like him, on the whole. Once, it was true, he and I had gotten along fine. That was before he was promoted over me. I was the better tactician, and people called me the best sword in Samarrath—but in the Watch, Raif was my superior. That was what crossing Marl got me.

Yes, I had plenty of reasons not to like Raif. For another, he was young, and good-looking. After ten years in Marl's Watch, I was no longer either.

But now, he sat beside me, his yellow hair plaited crooked on top of his head in that ridiculous Tyrian style, and drop me dead if I wasn't grateful he was there. He was cold, vicious and ambitious—all right, I guess I liked him a little bit—and he had the good sense to know I outmatched him. There were worse people to have at your side, even if he did look like something out of a bad comedy.

This Laine character, on the other hand, looked like a useless lump of lard who'd sell himself for not much more than the asking. His eyes were black and glassy, and he darted them over us, looking for the money.

Raif gave Laine a slick smile that would have sent a thinner man diving for cover. "We understand," he said, "that you're a man who knows people."

"Don't know no more than no-one else." Laine shifted his fat rear end on the bench, and you could see the sweat beading on his forehead from the effort.

Coins appeared under Raif's hand—big, fat gold ones—and he considered them casually. "Well," he said, "perhaps we've been misinformed…"

"You can't trust anyone these days," I agreed, "…what a pity. We'll take our clients' business elsewhere." Raif vanished the coins again, and we made to stand up.

Predictably, that got him. We were likely to be freer with someone else's cash than with our own—and that was a lot of money that had just disappeared into thin air, or wherever it was Raif put it when he did that trick. "Wait a second," Laine said, his eye on Raif's hand. "What is it

your clients would be wanting?"

"To arrange a meeting," I said, pushing those cursed knives out of my lap again.

"What kind of meeting?" Laine's eyes flickered, and he wouldn't look at my face.

I'm used to that. I'm not a pretty sight. So I smiled, which makes it worse; and I whispered, as the name is always whispered in a gathering.

Now, he looked directly at me, and I could see astonishment winning the war with greed. "Blackthorn?" he repeated.

"You heard me," I said. "What are you, a talking bird?"

After a moment, Laine's eyes glassed over again. "What do your clients want the meeting for?"

Raif and I looked at one another. It was common knowledge that Marl of the Watch wanted Blackthorn's head on a spike. That was why we were in this ridiculous get-up, passing ourselves off as Tyrian mercenaries.

Of course, it was about money.

The Iskrians, who ran the merchant guilds and had paid us off so reliably for so many years, were starting to run scared. Blackthorn had been steadily offing guildmen, one by one, over the last few months. The going rate for the Watch's protection had nosedived. Before we knew it, we'd be policing Samarrath for wages like our charter said we should.

Some said Blackthorn had it in for the Iskrians or even for the Watch personally. Others said it was just the money. Either way, we were all poorer for it, except Blackthorn, and the barracks were full of seriously displeased people.

No use letting our fat friend in on it though. "An arrangement to mutual advantage," Raif lied, spinning a coin idly in his fingers.

Laine grunted, greed now easily victorious over caution. "Not that I'm saying I can help youse, mind…"

"Of course not," I agreed.

"…but if anyone was to come to harm because of what I told youse…"

"Our clients' business is their own." Raif cut him off.

"Just get us Blackthorn," I added, and I leaned toward him. The scars Marl had cut into my face were even more hideous close up. "We'll take care of the rest."

He almost cringed under the table. Instead, "I want to be paid in advance," he squeaked.

I gave him points for courage, but not common sense. "Say that again." I rested one hand on my belt full of knives.

Laine's reflexes lifted his hands before he could stop them. "Don't be hasty," he stammered. "For such a big fish now, be fair…" He looked at Raif hopefully, apparently having given up on getting any sympathy from me.

"Tomorrow. No later. We'll be in contact." Raif spread his coins on the table so Laine could see them, and then scraped all but two back into his hand. "The rest when our business is done."

Laine's hand snaked out, and I whipped out a knife; the edge pressed sweetly into the squishy skin on the back of his hand. "Cross us, and you'll smother in your own grease," I said.

His damp fingers convulsed around the coins, and he snatched his hand away, the idiot. He'd be lucky if he hadn't sliced through his own tendons.

When he was gone, Raif and I looked at one another.

Raif was never afraid to look me in the face. That was one thing I did like about him. "What do you think?" he said.

That was another. I shrugged, and slipped the knife away. A step closer. Things were

looking up, it was true. It wasn't going to be the day quite yet, but by now I was used to waiting. "We'll see. Maybe he lied."

"To you?" said Raif, and gave me another one of those smiles. "He wouldn't dare."

All right, so maybe I liked that as well. I glared at him, in case he noticed. "We'll know," I said. "Tomorrow."

So tonight, I stood in the dark, waiting. It was hot, and my black Watchkeeper's cloak made me sweat, but I wasn't thinking about that. I had something more important on my mind.

Marl had posted some of us nearby, scattered in various hiding places, in case everything turned bad. I was supposed to be around the corner. It was typical that Marl would let me do all the work and then leave me out of the payoff.

But drop me dead if I was going to obey him this time.

After all I'd done, it was inconceivable that I wouldn't be there.

And something had happened that made my presence critical. Marl had listened to the arrangements we'd made, reamed me up and over for giving away too much of his coin, sworn at Raif for letting me, and decided he would go alone like we'd told Laine he would.

It was dark. I was waiting. And Marl was coming alone.

The stupid, arrogant fool.

Today, all of a sudden, was the day.

I hadn't dared to believe it until that moment.

I stepped into the light and let my boots scrape on the stones. There was no way I was going to allow him not to see me.

He turned and, for a moment, looked surprised, before anger darkened his face. "What are you doing here?"

I let my hand slip to my sword belt. "This is where you're meeting Blackthorn, isn't it?"

He looked at me with that sneering glare I hated, and I knew he was doing what he always did when he looked at me.

He was reliving that day, ten years ago, and enjoying every moment of it.

When he looked, he didn't see me: tough and lean, my hair hacked short above my ruined face, my arms scarred and sinewy, my weapons hard-used and comfortable at my side.

He saw the girl whose pretty face he'd slashed, whose young body he'd raped and tortured beyond simple indignity.

Fool that I was, I'd wanted to be a soldier. I'd still believed in public service and honour and a fair fight. When I saw the way he ran his outfit—as predatory as the gangs we were supposed to protect people from—I spoke up against him once too often. Besides, I was young, and female, and unwilling.

After all, junior officers don't say no to Marl.

For ten years he'd taken delight in humiliating me. All the times he belittled my skills, all the rotten assignments and harsh words and filthy jokes when he knew I could hear.

Ten years I humbled myself, making out that I'd learned my lesson. Ten years of turning my head the other way, of pretending not to listen, of accepting the taunts and slights and abuses as if they were my due. Ten years also of hard physical work, of fighting and stealing and killing that had turned me into a different person altogether.

I'd wanted to be a soldier. Now, I was a gangster.

All that remained of that decent girl was the hate.

I tightened my fingers and let my hate slip from my belt with the wonderful ringing sound it always made. The steel was so blue it looked black—I'd spared no expense—and the short, thick blade curved to a wicked point.

Just like a thorn.

His eyes widened, and with black satisfaction, I awaited the moment when he didn't see the girl any longer.

But his face only twisted with scorn. "You stupid whore," he said. "Are you trying to scare me? Maybe it's time for another lesson for you. Give me that and I'll shove it up your…"

And then he stared, and gurgled, and choked—and ten years of hope crumbled to nothing.

All those years I'd spent imagining how this was going to be. How I was going to make him suffer as I suffered. How he was going to die, his throat bleeding from so many screams of agony, and how it was going to take him a very long time.

And now I'd gone and killed him. With a single, angry thrust of blue steel that he probably didn't even feel.

That warm rush on my hands was his blood, pouring out far too fast.

That shrieking noise in my ears was surely opportunity, laughing his skinny guts out.

I ripped the thorn from Marl's throat, releasing another heavy gout of blood. Marl dropped to his knees in front of me, an image I'd savoured through countless long nights alone, but it didn't matter.

I stood there for a long time, his body slumped on the ground at my feet, the wet thorn blade warm in my hand.

When the first Watchkeeper came around the corner, I simply reacted.

His body tumbled on top of Marl's, and my arm was scarlet to the elbow.

I turned and waited for the next one.

And I saw Raif, his sword balanced and ready in his hand.

I stopped, lowered my arm, and we looked at each other.

I knew without looking that behind me were my people. Laine, fat and stupid-looking, and the cleverest person I knew. Marc, the quickest knife in Samarrath except for me, short a couple of teeth and fingernails but with his sense of humour very much intact. Lena, who'd had to sleep with Raif for a week before he'd believe he'd charmed her enough to get good information out of her. And all the rest. All the men and women we'd paid and blackmailed and beaten our way through, one by one, on the trail of the infamous Blackthorn.

They all had their reasons for wanting Marl to suffer. None of them were as good as mine. But when you've got a plan, you have to do whatever it takes. You can't afford to be choosy.

Raif had been there through the whole thing too. He'd had to be. Marl would never have bought into it on my say-so.

I could hear footsteps on the stones. The rest of Raif's Watchkeepers weren't far away.

I was sorry I'd lied to him.

I had plenty of reasons not to like Raif.

But his contempt for Marl—and his talent for duplicity—weren't among them.

I thought of the way Raif listened to me, took notice of me, trusted me, when no one else did any of those things, and it occurred to me that maybe—just maybe—he'd understand.

I gestured with the bloody thorn at the dead soldier. "This man just murdered Captain Marl," I said. It was out there for him to take, and I waited to see what he would do.

Raif looked at them all, one by one, and then his gaze returned to me. His bright eyes took in the blood on my uniform, the curved steel in my hand and came to rest finally on my face.

"You're Blackthorn…?"

I pushed the man's body off with my boot, and yanked at the officer's torque that still lay gleaming around Marl's neck. "That's 'Captain Blackthorn', to you," I said, and I stepped away, the torque dripping in my hand.

Raif looked again at Marl's body, and at the sharp point of my thorn, poised and ready. And then—like the better opportunist that he was—he lowered his sword. "Yes, ma'am," he said, and gave me his best, melting smile.

The End

The various iterations of E.J.'s career include student of law, mathematics and music, air force officer, telephone fundraiser and travel agent. She has three pets (cat, dog and husband) and loves them all, along with her writing, her oboe and her stuffed hippo.

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me feel a bit more generous toward him.

"In that case, I had better find it before Merlin does. Where is the Enion Tapestry?"

"Why?"

"I need to get to Barnath Lake. I have a hunch the Shuttle may be nearby."

"Take me with you!" he cried shrilly.

I shook my head.

"You lied about being my father. That alone is sufficient reason to leave you in the state you are now."

He slumped and nearly fell from the stool. His hunchback grew noticeably larger; his face twisted into a wicked and unfamiliar mask. He was quickly descending into the madness of the caricature Merlin had foisted upon him. And then, at the brink, he gathered himself.

"Will you return me to the way I once was, if you find the Shuttle?" he asked in a croaking whisper.

"Yes," I said. "I'm not a monster like my brother. Now show me the weaving."

"All right. This way," he rasped.

He hop-stepped behind the loom to a secluded alcove where the Enion Tapestry hung. I gazed upon Tirach Mir in its dark, brooding fastness, Mistelwood's shadows hovering on its flanks. A bright glimmer of blue in a cirque well below the treeline indicated Barnath Lake. A shiver ran through me and my heart beat faster. This was the true Enion Tapestry, not some forgery. A vibrant shimmer reflected from the weaving's surface as though a thin film of ice coated the threads, protecting them from any intrusion. Yet I felt within me an attunement to it, and I knew that I could use the tapestry as a portal to any place within Enion.

I started toward it and Graymalkin gripped my hand. His eyes narrowed and I could not tell if madness or guile lay behind them.

"Don't trust my sister or my brother," he said hoarsely.

I smiled.

"I don't trust any of you."

He giggled and let go of me.

"A wise thing. But remember, at least I warned you about them." He turned and limped into the shadows.

I placed my hand against the fabric along the lake's shoreline. It was cold like the face of a glacier. Then a warmth like a summer air current brushed against my fingertips. The weaving blazed in a tracery of animation, and the landscape became three dimensional, until the whole of Barnath Lake stretched out before me. I smelled water and the sweet scent of butterscotch pines. I pressed harder and my arm pierced the weave up to my shoulder. Darkness enveloped my outstretched hand. The night was moist and chilly; somewhere off to my right, a loon hooted. I took a step and stood on the shore.

A frosty white sliver of moon seemed to balance on a crag of Tirach Mir. Dawn was about an hour away. On the dark water, a ripple and a splash. A quarter of a way around the lake, the dull red glow of embers marked a camp. Tents traced ebony lines against the white shore.

I heard a twig snap and knew by its harshness that the sound had been deliberate. I slowly raised my hands, palms outward to show they were empty.

"I am Lord Qweg," I said quietly into the stillness.

A pair of shadows slipped out of the forest beside me. Vale Foresters, tall and lithe, gray-cloaked in darkness, a hint of moonlight on silver. I heard the steady strain of a bow string as it stretched against the quiet.

"Artemis is expecting me," I added.

A whispery voice behind me. "So we were told. But how do we know you are Lord Qweg?"

"You receive a lot of visitors here?"

"Very few people know how to reach this place. Then you appear like a wraith beside the lake. Perhaps you are naught but a creature of the beast army dressed like Qweg to fool us."

"Check the blade at my side. It will tell you who I am."

Hands reached roughly inside my cloak and patted my chest, armpits, waist and legs. They removed the knife from its boot sheath. I resisted the urge to snap the Forester's neck for being presumptuous with me. At last he finished his search and unbuckled my sword belt, drawing it into the night. Moonlight gleamed from Thruvir's guard, fashioned in the shape of a snow berry bush.

He gasped and said to the other two, "It's Qweg's sword all right." Slipping the belt over one shoulder, he pointed to the camp. "That way."

The four of us rounded the shoreline, walking on sand that glinted diamond-like beneath the dying moonlight. By the time we reached the camp, the sand paled to a dull white in the approaching sunrise. What I thought were tents were really pine boughs leaning against each other like poles of a teepee.

The Forester carrying Thruvir went to the center cone. The other two remained silent and motionless beside me. He brushed the needles and a vague tinkling sough filled the air. A rustle from within, and the man stepped aside. Dressed in shades of green and mist, Artemis stood at the entrance; rainbow hair framed her elfin face.

He handed her my sword belt and knife and whispered in her ear.

She nodded, never taking her eyes from me. A smile played faintly at the corners of her thin lips. When the man finished, she dismissed him.

He bowed and joined his companions who now waited at the forest edge. Before vanishing into the woods, he made a backward glance that said everything: 'Don't trust this one.'

Artemis studied Thruvir for several seconds, running her fingertip over the guard's contours. At last she came over. She studied me for a few moments, the granite specks in her eyes dancing keenly.

"Walk with me," she said.

We set out along the shore. Vapor rising from the lake swirled in gray tendrils among the rushes at its edge. Bright shards of sunlight broke through the tips of trees, skipping like brilliant jewels across the water.

"Delon and the others think you are a sorcerer in league with the beast army," Artemis said when we were alone. "You appeared out of the air suddenly."

"I am sorry I surprised them," I said.

"It was the manner that startled them. The creatures appear the same way — a shimmer, the air brightens and they walk into Enion as through a doorway."

I nodded.

"They come through the boundary of the Umbra where it touches Enion. My entrance mimicked the same effect, but I did not come here from the Umbra. I was in my weaving room at the palace and I stepped through the Enion Tapestry and onto the shore of Barnath."

"How is that possible?"

"It's something that only a person with this mark can do."

I traced the tattoo beside my eye, drawing forth the energy concentrated there. Then I touched her silver-blue crescent. Her body jerked in surprise as though she sensed for the first

time the power surging through that mark. She slowly put a fingertip to the tattoo. I watched it pulsate vibrantly in the early morning light. Artemis said nothing for several heartbeats as we walked.

Overhead an eagle glided in the stillness. I watched it fly silently across the lake, dip a wing and wheel abruptly, talons raking the water. A speckled gleam of color thrashed in its claws. With a shrill cry, the raptor climbed steadily toward a stand of trees on the far shore. My inclinations lie with hawks and eagles most days.

I didn't need to know the details of my past to understand that much of my life I have lived like them, taking what I needed from the world around me. But this morning, watching Artemis encounter the realization of her birthright for the first time, my empathy lay with the trout. My daughter would never be the same after this day. Somehow she would have to come to grips with the terrible power that existed within her. I did not envy the trials that lay ahead of her.

Artemis stopped and half drew Thruvir from its sheath. Clusters of light formed tiny diamonds along its cutting edge.

"Mother told me you forged her sword at the same time as this. Thruvir and Vajra — brother and sister blades."

"That's true," I replied. "And I destroyed the forge afterwards."

"Is it also true that no weapon can defeat either of them?"

"Yes."

"And yet, you trained Peer to be the greatest fighter in the realm and made him mother's personal bodyguard. No one can stand against him in combat...not even you. Why would you do that?"

I'd donate my soul to the Devil's favorite charity if I could unearth enough of my past to be able to answer that riddle. But I kept that observation to myself. Instead I gave a stock, and very truthful, answer.

"Because I love your mother."

Artemis chuckled.

"You would not have admitted that in years past." She tilted her head to one side, her jeweled hair spilling across her shoulders. "Maybe you know something about yourself that the rest of us can only guess at, something that even mother's eldritch sight cannot discern."

I answered her with a smile and said, "If you're asking, 'Am I dangerous?' the answer is yes. If you want to know, 'Am I a threat to Enion?' the answer is no. But this," I pointed to the mark beside my eye, "this represents a power that can be a great threat to Enion when wielded by evil hands. And now a person who knows how to use this power is attacking Enion and I have to stop him before it is too late."

"Merlin Skye," Artemis said. "Mother explained that he's another Shadow Weaver and that he is behind the beast army raids on Enion." I nodded. Artemis handed me my sword. "I want to stop him too."

I buckled on Thruvir and felt whole again with the enchanted blade at my side.

"I want to learn all about the Umbra, the Shadowloom, weaving, everything," she added.

"Your mother is afraid you'll leave Enion if I teach you that."

Artemis pursed her lips but she didn't protest. Instead she said, "I am a good fighter, and as leader of the Vale Foresters, I can do a lot to protect the realm. But with this," she tapped her tattoo with a long slender finger, "I can be even more effective. Perhaps the difference between Enion's safety and destruction."

A Shadow Weaver daughter on my side could prove the balance in the war against my twin brother. Yet, I was not prepared to divulge my amnesia or the relationship between Merlin and myself to Artemis. Call it the evolutionary mechanism of self preservation, but I wasn't about to bare my soul to her in the hopes that she would see the nobility of my cause and join me.

So I said, "It is my responsibility to end the perils facing Enion. But it is also true that I could use some help. I will teach you what you need to know. But not everything I know."

She looked at me sideways.

I thought of a quotation that I could not attribute to Enion or Thereon but had popped into my mind, as all the other incongruous phrases and images had over the last few days, and that I believed I must have learned in another Tapestry World, possibly...probably Earth. "This power you seek is absolute and, as such, can corrupt absolutely. I would protect you from these effects if I could," I told her.

She considered this for a few breaths. Then she jutted her chin toward an outcropping of Tirach Mir that looked like a Vale Forester on a pony at full gallop, bow slung over his back.

"The cave lies in that direction, a day and half ride from here."

* * *

Upward, beneath a molten disk of hammered gold in a dark blue velvet sky, past crags of jagged granite and through a forest of gray-green, mist-tinged wood, Artemis and I rode toward my destiny.

Much of what we traveled through came back to me, not as remembrances, but as a kind of predator's instinct. I recognized the land through the savageness that I kept bottled up within me. I had kept that violent part of myself at bay for so long that it now seemed second nature to do so. I was of two minds when it came to this state I had apparently achieved. A part of me saw this action as simple cunning to protect myself.

Until I learned who I was and what I had done in the past, I kept my actions toned down. This lessened the chance I would provoke some retaliation against me. On the other hand, perhaps the loss of certain memories altered my personality and lent a great deal toward controlling my rage and allowing it out only when necessary. Not knowing who I was or the patterns of life's vicissitudes behind my emotions damped the ardor which propelled my fury. Nor did memory have the chance to blunt my conscience through an overwhelming tonnage of black deeds and excesses. (Graymalkin's sketch of Merlin's and my corrupt behavior had the ring of truth in it that my amnesia could not deny and that would make any attempt at reform seem impossible.)

That I now regretted my part in my brother's and my mutual descent into cruelty and ennui added to my desire to protect the one beautiful act of creation by my hands. I would do anything to save Enion. At the same time, I was living the proverbial clean slate, entering my relationships without baggage; I was my own *tabula rasa*.

It was appealing to think of myself as fresh, without blemish or blight on my soul. But this last part was not entirely true, of course. The strange images of a world far different than this one, the familiar yet impossible to cite words, the utterances of people that existed in no time that I could recall, the liminal feeling of living a life without a context, all of these oddities haunted my thoughts as specters of an existence outside of Enion. I was more than Qweg, Lord of Enion's army; more than the dark Shadow Weaver who at one time had won the favor of the magnificent Adella; more than the black hero who now quested to find his destiny. I was more

than the sum of all these things. My life was like a quantum particle, there and not there. The not there part, I was beginning to think, would be better left uncovered; and this thought led to an uncertainty of whether to use the Ixtlan Shuttle to restore my memory.

I recalled something H.L. Mencken wrote: "Every man sees in his relatives a series of caricatures of himself." My niece and nephews grasped at intrigue the way others eat and drink to live. They lied and used people without conscience as a person might swat a mosquito. I wished not to live in their manner nor be reminded of it. Still, I experienced a great deal of affection toward my brother's children because of their trials at Merlin's hands. Even their subterfuge did not darken my temper and loosen the mad rage that lay beneath my surface. I knew that I would help them, though in my own cautious way. The cynical part of me was not about to let me turn the other cheek. I would not allow the Ixtlan Shuttle out of my grasp for one moment.

As for Merlin, whose depravity had put me in the position I now found myself, I would thank him for restoring decency in my life in his own perverted way. Then I would make sure my brother never hurt anyone again.

So we rode onward and upward, and these thoughts toiled within me as the day crested and fell towards evening. Night came upon us swiftly, and Artemis led us to a Foresters' cottage, one of several built as part of a network in the higher portions of Mistelwood. A stream with a high waterfall passed behind it.

Artemis went inside while I splashed in a small pool, washing away the dust from our day's travel. Afterwards, I stood beneath the gushing chute, the cold water cleansing those veiled parts of soul and spirit so seldom tended to by men like me. I don't want to make too much of this. The ride and the thoughts that accompanied it weren't an epiphany. But whatever heartless bastard I had been as Lord Qweg before I lost my memory, I resolved to set aside permanently.

I walked back toward the cottage. Smoke threaded from the chimney in a lazy circle like a gray rope. Inside, Artemis readied our dinner, a pair of gamecocks her swift bow had taken down. My stomach growled appropriately. I emerged into the clearing in front of the cabin and heard voices. I recognized Artemis, her speech heavily accented with the whispering patois of the Vale Foresters. The other sounded like a young boy's with a hint of puberty in it. At the same time it was angry and a bit frightened. I slowed my walk and listened and by the time I opened the door, I knew it.

Artemis stood at the fireplace. She had set the birds roasting on a spit in the hearth. The table was laid out with places for two, and the cabin looked like a woodsman's hut with his daughter preparing supper for his return. Except tied to a chair at the table sat Morgan.

My niece looked at me with wide, puzzled and scared eyes.

"What have we here?" I asked.

Artemis said, "I found this young girl rummaging through the food provisions. She told some wildly absurd story of coming to Enion with you."

"It's true!" Morgan blurted. "I did . . ."

Artemis glared at her and she stilled. "This is a Forester cottage. None are allowed in here but our own kind and those who honor our customs."

I nodded and smiled, thinking of the irony of my niece and daughter meeting in this manner.

"This violation isn't funny."

"That isn't what I'm smiling at," I said. "I do know her. Her name is Morgan."

"Whether you know her or not, she still violated our customs." Artemis's short sword

appeared magically in her hand. Firelight gleamed along the milky white crystal. She crossed the room to the table and rested the point against a small artery pulsing beneath the translucent skin at Morgan's neck.

"Put that away," I said quietly.

She hesitated.

"Something has to be done."

"But not by you or me. If you had wanted to punish her, you would have already done it before I arrived. Besides, I owe her my life."

Artemis's blade jerked away.

"She has a life-bond on you?" she asked, incredulity lacing her speech.

I nodded.

"She saved me from slavers when I was in Thereon, a world on the other side of the Umbra."

She lowered her sword.

"A Vale Forester cannot ignore a life-bond," Artemis muttered and backed away. She stood just behind ready to cut the bonds.

My new self and my suspicious self fought a battle over releasing my niece, and in the end, the suspicious part won. Morgan would stay tied up until she explained herself.

I pulled one of the simple wooden chairs around the table until it faced Morgan.

"How did you get here?"

"While you were fighting the griffin, I got scared and ran away. I just kept on running. It seemed the best thing to do at the time." She looked apprehensively over her shoulder at Artemis's sword.

Remembering Adella's reaction, I sympathized.

"Go on."

"Later I found Phobos, he hadn't run very far, and I left Enion for Tirach Mir. I traveled up high just to get away. I found this place and thought to hide here for a couple of days and then come find you."

"I didn't see any signs of another horse when we arrived," Artemis interrupted.

"He ran off the night before I arrived here."

"And now? What are your plans?" I asked.

"I'm just happy to see you again."

Her eyes were ingenuous, and if not for my talk with Graymalkin, I might have believed her. But I knew the trickery that lay beneath that innocent air. I was tempted to leave her tied up, since with her out of the way, I would not have to account for her whereabouts while I searched for the Shuttle. But Artemis waited to cut her bonds, and I supposed not untying her might skew my daughter's view of me. Also, that *tabula rasa* I spoke of earlier, it made me want to give everyone a fair shake.

"Release her."

Artemis made a simple cut, slicing the rope that held Morgan's wrists.

* * *

Dinner was a mostly silent affair. I told the story about Merlin and his treatment of his family for Artemis's benefit. I mentioned Morgan's relationship to him and all that he had done to her, leaving out Gareth and Macbeth and my kinship to Merlin, not wanting to muddy

the waters of my newfound, father/daughter relationship with Artemis. Before dinner ended, I explained about the Ixtlan Shuttle.

Artemis sat through it all quietly, her eyes going back and forth between Morgan and me. When I finished, she said something about getting up early and retired to the loft. Morgan and I took the dishes outside to the stream where we washed them.

"Why did you really run away?" I asked when we were alone.

"Qweg was never very well liked here. I didn't want to take the chance that the powers in charge might not see fit to let you resume your former position."

"That would have been nice to know before I entered here."

She shrugged.

"You got by all right, I see."

I shrugged.

"I still haven't figured that out yet. Though everyone is wary in my presence, some are beginning to accept . . . even to like me."

"Like Artemis?"

"Among others."

Morgan looked back at the cabin and laughed.

"She doesn't know about your amnesia and being Merlin's twin."

I stared at her.

"She doesn't know about you, Macbeth and Gareth either," I replied. I smiled at the confusion on her face. "Don't bother denying anything. Your younger brother told me everything about the plan to get me to help you."

Morgan thought about this for a pair of minutes. Her face told me nothing and I admired her coolness.

"Where does that leave us?" she asked.

"With me calling the shots and you sitting back and doing nothing until I decide it is time."

"You need me along on this venture. You don't know where the Ixtlan Shuttle is and you could use my help finding it."

"No one knows where it is, except that it is somewhere in Enion. But my attunement to it may lead me to its hiding place. I don't need you for that."

"I could tell Artemis everything."

I kept my voice flat.

"Then tell her. I won't be blackmailed."

Morgan stared at me. Her eyes lost some of the confidence she showed when first we met in Thereon.

"You mean it."

"Yes I do. If you want me to help you and your siblings, take all the threats off the table."

"All right. I apologize for even suggesting it. I'm a bit rattled, not knowing what has been going on and then unexpectedly finding you again on your way to seek the Shuttle. It's just that I don't want Merlin to find it first. That would be disastrous."

"Apology accepted."

I didn't believe she had been rattled for a second. She rolled with my counterthrust too easily. But I didn't say anything about that. I just concentrated on the fact that the young girl in front of me was actually a woman with many years of experience. I might feel kinship with her because of our common enemy, Merlin, but I wasn't about to relinquish my prudence.

We continued washing. After a while, Morgan broke the silence.

"But common sense shouldn't be off the table," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You still have your memory loss and you don't know how to use the Ixtlan Shuttle."

"True, but neither do you."

"But Gareth, Macbeth and I know more than you do. We at least saw Merlin at the loom working the shuttle when he changed us."

"What are you proposing?"

"That you let us guide you in its use."

I stacked the last of the plates into a basket. What she said made some sense. But it also meant trusting them and they had already bankrupted that privilege.

"I'll consider it."

"You should consider it now."

"I will, when we've recovered the Shuttle and have returned to the palace."

"Do not wait too long in your deliberations," she pressed.

"Why are you pushing this so hard?"

"Because you can be sure that Merlin isn't waiting for you to decide what to do. He's looking for the Shuttle as we speak and might already be in Enion. Once he gets his hands on it, he'll use it against the three of us without delay. Every moment you waste, he spends getting that much closer to reclaiming power over the Umbra."

"He'll still need a Shadowloom before he can do anything, and Enion has the only working loom in existence, since you destroyed the other one when you attacked Tintagel. He'll have to come here and we can stop him at that time."

"It may not have been destroyed. Merlin could have reconstructed Tintagel's by now."

"You know this for certain?"

She shook her head.

"I can't be positive. The loom was in pieces when we left with you. But don't underestimate Merlin, he could have repaired it."

This put a whole new slant on the situation. Even so, I only had Morgan's word on this.

"I'll think about what you've told me."

I picked up the basket and started toward the house. She tugged on my sleeve and spun me around with the force of her grip.

"You can't afford to hesitate, uncle. Merlin wouldn't."

"So I've gathered."

"So you'll let me come along with you tomorrow when you visit the cave?"

"I said, 'I'll think about it'." Then I added, "The four of us."

She blinked in surprise. "What?"

"Just now you said that Merlin would use the Shuttle against the three of us. There are four of us, not to mention the fact that Enion itself is in danger."

She made an indifferent gesture.

"My siblings and I have been working together for a long time. It was a simple, honest slip."

I nodded and entered the cottage, closing off any more discussion. It was a simple slip, but I wondered what its honesty implied.

Chapter Seventeen

Long before daybreak, Artemis and I saddled the horses.

"We'll take Morgan with us," I said, tightening the cinch on my mount.

"Why?" Artemis asked.

"She could be useful. She's seen the Ixtlan Shuttle and she might be able to help me find it. But I have another purpose. I think she would follow us no matter what, and I would rather have her where I can keep an eye on her than at my back."

Artemis nodded. "Would be wise."

We finished and led the horses to the front of the cabin. Morgan came out carrying our supplies. We immediately headed into Tirach Mir's fastness with Morgan sitting in front of me, as she had during part of our ride through the Umbra.

Enion's constellations faded as the sky lightened from dark violet to azure. The dawn opened clear and cool; by midmorning winds sculpted clouds in soaring pyramids. The forest thinned as we traveled upward toward the treeline. The way became steep and rocky and twice we dismounted so that the horses could make it up rough steep defiles.

The path opened up as we approached a tarn. I thought the fishing in this lake nonexistent, the mineral content turning the water an impenetrable turquoise; yet, someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to build a landing and moor a small skiff at the far end. The water rippled as we passed by as though a breeze had escaped the shadow of the cliffs surrounding the lake. But I detected no wind. A shiver ran up my spine as I turned my back and followed Artemis deeper into the cirque.

She pursued a winding path among a maze of spindly Joshua pine and enormous boulders, strewn about as if giants had been playing marbles. I was reminded of Thereon and the labyrinth of trees that similarly concealed the arch on that Tapestry World. We did not travel far before we burst upon a clearing. No arch spanned it. On the far side, a rocky escarpment rose high into the air, and at its base a tremendous cavern gaped at us. Fog roiled soundlessly within its opening, occasionally sending silken streamers of vapor, like tentacles, into the clearing.

Artemis led us to one side where we tethered the horses before approaching the swirling mist. She stood several paces apart from Morgan and I, carrying her bow with an arrow already nocked. I liked to think that she prepared herself in case my niece tried something, but her eyes danced back and forth equally between us.

I hesitated, staring at the adit. I could hear blood pulsing in my ears like a tympany. My hands grew moist and I dried them on my pants. I recognized the source of my nervousness. My mind was blank and I had no notion of how to proceed.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Morgan asked.

"I don't know what to do," I answered, keeping my voice low so that my daughter could not overhear me.

Morgan took my hand and spoke in whispers.

"Stand in the entrance and think of the Shadowloom and the Shuttle."

"Will that work?" I asked.

"The Ixtlan Shuttle is not of any Tapestry World. Its origins are in the Umbra, as I believe the loom to be as well."

"Do you know this for sure, or are you just presupposing that they were made in the

Umbra?"

"It's a reasonable assumption. Something Merlin said just before he exiled me on Thereon. He was staring at the Shuttle and not really paying attention, or maybe he just thought that I could never free myself from what he had planned for me. He caressed it and murmured, 'I have bedimmed the noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds and twixt the green sea and azured vault...'"

"...Set roaring war: the dread rattling thunder have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak with his own bolt." I finished the verse and licked my lips.

"You know this," Morgan said warily.

I nodded.

"I've just remembered it. Prospero, a sorcerer in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, speaks those lines. Something else too, though I think it is personal, or at least not from any play or book: 'A glimmer in a sea of storm, forged in the vast abyss, from my thoughts to storm's withdrawl, the sight of land and wholeness.'"

"What does it mean?" Morgan asked.

"I can't be sure, but it could be part of an incantation for the Shuttle."

I let go of Morgan's hand and entered the cavern, uncertain but determined. I stood just within its lip and turned so that I faced outward. Artemis and Morgan were figures gauzed in smoke before me; sound came as a distant roar in a seashell. I concentrated on the loom, summoning the affinity I felt for it when I first saw the timbered frame in the palace. Silently, I repeated the lines I had spoken aloud.

An uncontrollable urge to draw Thruvir commanded the muscles of my right arm. I held it, grasping the hilt lightly in both hands, so that the tip pointed slightly down in front of me. From some part of me, which memory could not serve to name, I reached out with my will and sought contact with the Ixtlan Shuttle. Thruvir pulsed like an artery in response. Deep crimson bled from the runes' tracery to the silvery edge. Thruvir twitched and a soft tug pulled me from the cave mouth. I followed its lead out of the clearing.

This sorcery made a kind of sense, especially to a man clutching at anything to protect those things he loved. Like the Ixtlan Shuttle, Thruvir had been forged amid the fiery whirlwinds of the Umbra's chaos, and now it seemed to be working like a water witch, using my subconscious, to direct me toward the Shuttle.

I spared no backward glance, but I sensed Artemis and Morgan following me. I backtracked several hundred yards to the turquoise lake. My sword guided me to the far end of the landing and the skiff. I stood motionless for several minutes. Apprehension and longing filled me. I desired the Shuttle beyond all other things, but this lake smelled of death. No fish could live in its murky depths. Yet, no other course seemed likely. A sense of excitement tinged my anticipation as I once more set my will upon the blade. It thrummed in my hands and directed me into the boat.

Morgan tried to clamber in beside me, but Thruvir sliced at her with a will of its own, forcing her to scramble out of the way.

"Stay back!" I warned.

Artemis undid the mooring rope and the boat glided away from the dock under its own power. A slight ripple furrowed the calm surface as it headed into the lake. Toward the middle, the boat stopped suddenly. I lurched forward and banged my knees against the gunwale. I regained my footing and stood staring at the calm water. Thruvir had stilled, so I sheathed the sword and waited.

The air was heavy and humid and completely still. I wondered if despite my longing to find the Shuttle, I had set myself up for failure. It bore the means to restore my memories as well as protect Enion. But I did not want any of my past to taint my love for Adella nor damage the budding relationship with my daughter. Perhaps my subconscious had set me up to fail by leading me to this desolate lake.

I was thinking of how to turn around and head back to shore, when all at once the water started churning. The boat rocked and I was forced to kneel to keep from being thrown overboard. A geyser erupted in front, sending fountains of blue-green water all around me. A long sinewy neck, covered with coppery scales, burst through the turquoise rain. I gasped and stared up at a dragon's massive, wedge-shaped head. Whirling opalescent eyes stared back at me. The mouth opened, revealing double rows of curved teeth and a pair of long fangs. A black forked tongue darted, licked the leathery lips and retreated. The head was at least twice as large as the skiff and I knew the beast could swallow me whole.

Its pointed and tufted ears flattened, and the eyes rolled in angry shades of red and yellow. The long neck arched and I heard a sharp intake of breath. The wide mouth opened again, and I braced for a blasting roar and a wall of wind.

The eyes abruptly whirled blue and green.

"Qweg." A sweet, slightly breathy voice, like a young woman's, emerged. "You haven't visited me for a long time. I was beginning to think you didn't love me anymore."

I caught a hint of amusement in the dragon's tone and something of loneliness; I could hear in the undertones Bacall whispering to Bogart, "You do know how to whistle, don't you?"

I relaxed and then she looked past my narrow craft at the shore.

"I see you've brought me a pair of presents. How...precious."

My stomach knotted and I stood slowly. I pointedly kept my hand away from my sword.

"They're not for you," I said evenly.

The scaled ridges over her eyes narrowed and her lips drew back in a sullen pout.

"I can't have you eating friends of mine," I added firmly.

"I wouldn't eat them. They're too stringy and besides, you know I cannot; they're related to you."

I hid my relief.

I said, "I believe you have something of mine."

A deep-throated laughter rippled through the long stalk of her neck, and I swear she batted her eyes at me.

"Imagine my surprise when the Ixtlan Shuttle fell into my domain. I knew you'd come for it, sooner or later."

"If you know that, then you also know how important it is to me."

"Yes, I do. But maybe I'll just keep it. That way you won't be in a position to do any mischief."

"It doesn't belong to you."

"It doesn't belong to you either. Or did you forget that without me you would never have been able to steal it in the first place?"

I hid my shock at this disclosure. I presumed that Merlin and I had inherited the device. I never reckoned I had pilfered it.

I said, "I don't forget my obligations. Consider that I need your help again. Will you return it to me?"

Her wings unfurled in the water, the iridescent membranes shimmering blue-green. She

swayed back and forth; her neck wound about me until I stared directly into one lustrous eye. Her breath came as cottony puffs and tasted of roasted vanilla beans.

"I might." Her eye whirled darkly again. "Or, perhaps I'll broil you and give it to one of them. You deserve it!" she hissed. I swallowed hard and remained motionless. "Or maybe I'll give it back if you answer my question satisfactorily."

I liked the last idea best, so I kept my mouth shut and let her continue.

"I've protected the cave mouth for nearly a quarter of a century. I grow tired of guarding this place. If I return the trinket you seek, will you free me and change me back to my original form?"

I could not remember what she looked like before and I disliked agreeing without telling her the score.

"I don't know if I can," I began to answer.

The whirling orb changed hue and the ring of flesh around me tightened.

I added hastily, "I don't mean that I won't. I have been injured and my mind damaged. I can't remember what you looked like before the transformation."

"I'll show you," she said.

A barrage of images struck my brain, flooding my thoughts. I winced at the impact; then the input slowed and I saw within my mind a handsome older woman, white haired, wearing scaled armor and a plumed helm. Golden wings fluttered from her shoulder blades. She held a silver bow with both hands. And I recognized her: Nemesis. Despite the strength in her stance, death awaited her not many years hence. I must have woven her into a dragon because of their legendary immortality.

"You know that death would follow soon after," I said gently.

"Immortality is a cruel gift," she replied bitterly. Nemesis sighed. "I would see the world one last time through human eyes; taste its air and revel in its seasons with human senses. It is the least you can do. You owe me."

I agreed. And I would owe her a great deal if she returned the Ixtlan Shuttle to me. More than granting her a final wish, even.

"Bring me the Shuttle and I will restore you as soon as I am able."

She chuckled slyly, a sibilant hiss that made my flesh shiver. She contracted the muscles of her neck so that the scaly dragon hide wrapped me completely. I did not have room to draw Thruvir even had I thought of it.

"Can I trust you to keep your word?" Her lips drew back in a grim smile. "Be careful with your answer, Qweg. I possess a dragon's truth sense now. I can see into the inner recesses of your soul. This won't be like the last time when you tricked me and provided me endless life in this form in exchange for helping you. If you're lying, I'll crush you and toss your broken body onto the shore. Then no one will ever see the Ixtlan Shuttle again!"

Her eyes whirled a deep violet, and I sensed a part of her wished desperately for me to fail. I knew in my present state, I wanted to honor her request, but would the old Qweg's true nature compromise my vow? I honestly did not know the answer. How much of a man is memory and how much is nature? I swallowed and nodded slowly.

"I promise. As soon as I am able, I will turn you back into your original form. Above that, you can live your final years wherever you like."

Nemesis shuddered and her sleek scales pressed against me. Her eyes turned from red to orange, to green, to blue. After a few moments she uncoiled her neck and trilled a throaty melody of pleasure with soft undertones of regret. The water swirled and she disappeared beneath the

surface.

I had passed her test! I flexed my fingers, realizing that I had been clenching them tightly the whole time, and breathed out slowly. I became aware of my surroundings again. The cliffs of Tirach Mir rose high and rocky above me into the clouded sky. The air was sticky and heavily laced with the scents of sulphur and ozone. I turned toward shore and waved at Artemis and Morgan. They waved back. Moments later, Nemesis's head emerged. Nestled in the hollow between her nostrils lay the Ixtlan Shuttle.

I took the weaving tool and she disappeared silently beneath the turquoise water. The skiff moved again of its own accord toward shore. I hardly noticed it.

The Shuttle lay gleaming in my hands. Forged amid gloom and light, darkness and day, it had been torn from chaos; its power, as though cast from the interior of a flawless jewel, gleamed as a pale luminescence along the rounded curves of the Shuttle's entire slender length; the long narrow tongue was a wisp of shimmering silver; the smooth, curved plane of the stern was formed from a single emerald and gently grasped threads that floated in the moist air like starlight on water.

Just holding it set me trembling with pleasure. I recalled a body memory of weaving gossamer filaments through the warp like rays of moonglow through shadow. My will imposed upon the loom, I had formed a world woven in my image, fashioned physical laws to my whim. Time had slowed as the Shuttle exerted its effect on the Shadowloom, distorting the basic fabric of the Umbra to shape an oasis of stability in the disordered universe by forming a Tapestry World.

But there was more. For a long moment I also trembled at the prospect held out by the Shuttle. The promise of my mind's repair and, with my memory restored, of unlimited power. I paused and I knew that I wanted that power to protect my worlds forever from the madness of my brother.

The skiff nudged the landing and the jolt brought me back to myself. I stepped back a pace from the abyss. Maybe the battle with the gargoyle or standing alongside Della and Peer and Artemis to protect Enion had changed something within me. But in that moment I knew I would not walk through the Umbra with the Shuttle and heal my mind. I could not unleash that part of Qweg that inspired fear and loathing in these people.

Slipping the weaving device into my cloak, I clambered upon the wooden planks of the dock and stopped. Reflexively my hand went to Thruvir and froze upon its hilt.

Artemis kneeled; head bowed; hands bound behind her. A dark weal spread across her cheek and blood trickled from her lip, pooling on her chin like some alien scarlet insect.

Morgan stood behind her, an arrow nocked in Artemis's bow and the point resting upon the third vertebrae of my daughter's neck.

Artemis groaned.

"She surprised me."

Morgan laughed.

"People always underestimate a child, especially a little girl."

She held the bow like an expert, and I had no doubt she could send an arrow into my daughter and another one into me before I covered half the distance between us.

"What are you doing?" I asked automatically.

"Let's not drag this out. Give me the Shuttle or your daughter dies and I shoot you and take it anyway."

My mind raced furiously, looking for a way to save my daughter and the Shuttle.

"You don't need to do this. I am willing to restore you and your brothers."

"How noble. But we don't need you for that. Now quit stalling. Gareth is waiting."

Stalling was all I had to work with. I changed tactics.

"Of course he is."

She blinked.

"You don't seem surprised."

I shrugged.

"It makes sense that after my last talk with Gareth, he created a doorway in the Enion Tapestry so that you could leave your hiding place and join him in the weaving room. He filled you in on our conversation. Afterwards, you stepped through the Enion Tapestry to the Forester cabin because we would have to come that way to reach the cave. You would accompany us, and when the time was right, make a play for the Shuttle. But you would need a quick way out of here. So he's waiting, ready to open the door again."

She smirked.

"Very good. You're a lot smarter than we gave you credit for."

"Funny, your brother said the same thing. What I don't understand is the betrayal. All of us hate Merlin. We should be working together to stop him."

She threw her head back and laughed.

"You fool. You really don't know what any of this is about."

"I don't need to. At least, I don't think it is important. I'll keep my word and help you...even now. Return with us to the palace and all of this will be forgotten."

"Don't give me any of that sanctimonious crap. This is about power—power to control our own destinies and the fates of entire worlds. From the first time I ever saw the Shuttle and the Shadowloom, I wanted the same power as you possessed."

I did know what she meant, and it weighed heavily on my thoughts. The cynical part of myself urged me to act like the old Lord Qweg. Let Artemis die; throw the Shuttle into the lake. Nemesis would guard it until I returned. She was my creation after all and owed me her life and her wish. I was swayed by the notion—thinking only of myself, my past, my life.

I shuddered. The abyss was not very far away. In fact, it would never be very far away. I steeled myself. I would not allow my daughter to die by my hands.

Still, I delayed giving up the Shuttle. I did not trust Morgan to keep her end of any bargain we might strike.

"You think you're capable of wielding the Shuttle?" I asked

"As capable as you."

"And what of Macbeth and Gareth? Can you trust them enough to share it with them?"

Morgan smiled.

"I will restore them because they helped me gain my life back. But only one person can wield the Shuttle."

"And that would be you."

"Who better?"

I let a silence hang while a smile played across my lips.

Her brow furrowed and the corners of her mouth turned down.

"What?"

"Nothing really...It's just that earlier at the palace Graymalkin was willing to sell you out."

"I don't know what you're getting at."

"I'm sure you do. But I'll explain it anyway. How long do you suppose your brothers will let you control the Ixtlan Shuttle before they begin scheming to steal it from you so they can create their own worlds? A week? a month?"

She frowned and the green flecks in her eyes flashed angrily.

"Enough! Give me the Shuttle!"

I ignored her.

"What about me and my memories? Will you help me recover them?"

Her smile returned thinly.

"I'll keep your memories safe, have no fear. And someday I will restore them to you on a world of my choosing."

She pointed the bow at me.

"The Shuttle," she demanded.

The moment had come and I could do nothing more to prevent it. I reached into my cloak slowly and drew out the Shuttle. It gleamed and seemed as if animated by a life of its own. The attunement between the two of us was very strong. I hesitated, loathe to give it up.

"Toss it here," Morgan commanded impatiently.

I threw it and she caught it deftly.

"I have it!" she shouted.

Graymalkin's disembodied voice called out. "Morgan. Quickly. There isn't much time! The guards are after me."

I noticed then for the first time a shimmer in the air at the end of the dock behind her. A hand and an arm reached through, and I recognized Graymalkin's diminutive shadow outlined in the tremulous light.

Morgan shoved the weaving tool inside her cloak. She drew back the bow and I thought she might shoot me.

Artemis reared up and lurched into Morgan. The bow twanged discordantly and the arrow thudded into the dock at my feet. Morgan staggered badly but recovered and swung the bow at my daughter's head. Artemis reeled out of the way, falling heavily on the wooden planking.

The slaver's dagger was in my hand. Morgan was already running toward her brother. I aimed; the knife flew and struck Graymalkin's outstretched arm.

He screamed and his arm disappeared.

The shimmer fluctuated wildly and collapsed in on itself. Morgan ran through it but did not vanish.

"No!" she howled.

I drew Thruvir and advanced toward her.

Morgan paled and fled toward the cavern.

Artemis regained her feet. I slashed her bonds.

"We have to stop her before she reaches the cave!" I said.

We ran after her. Morgan reached the Umbra steps ahead of us and vanished into its shadowlands. Artemis wanted to pursue her. I shook my head.

"She could be lost in any one of an infinite number of realities and we have no means to track her."

"What do we do next?"

"We hurry back to the palace and hope we arrive in time."

"In time for what?"

"To protect Enion from Morgan."

Bewilderment spread across my daughter's face.

"I don't understand. Now that she has the Ixtlan Shuttle, why would she return to Enion?"

"The loom," I answered. "The palace has the only functioning Shadowloom."

Understanding passed across her features.

"She needs the loom to work the magic of the Shuttle and change her to the way she once was."

I nodded. We hurried to the horses.

"What about Graymalkin? Can he help her?" Artemis asked as we mounted.

I shook my head.

"I'm sure he's long gone from the palace by now."

Even though I had set Peer to watch him, the dwarf had somehow outwitted my old friend. But I had wounded Graymalkin and temporarily foiled the plot to steal the Shuttle and the Shadowloom. Still, that did not matter. Right now, my only thoughts were to safeguard Adella and Enion. I had no idea how long it would take Morgan to gain Thereon and return to Enion with Macbeth and the reinforcements they needed; but I counted on her inexperience with the Shuttle to delay her movements through the Umbra and give me time to reach the palace before she did.

We mounted our horses and Artemis took a hold of my arm.

"What did you mean about using the Shuttle to restore your memory?"

"I'll explain while we ride."

I told her everything that had happened since I awoke in Thereon, including Graymalkin's and Morgan's parts and the fact that Merlin was my twin brother.

She was silent for most of the telling, asking only a few questions to clarify points. Then she stayed quiet for a long while afterwards as we threaded our way through the forest.

When we stopped to rest the horses, she said, "You could have thrown the Shuttle back into the lake. That would have stopped Morgan and given you a chance to restore your memory."

"I think she would have killed you if I did that," I answered. "I couldn't risk you."

Then Artemis did an unexpected thing. She leaned toward me and kissed my cheek.

"Thank you, Father."

"I'm not so sure I deserve that."

She smiled.

"I didn't see much of you while growing up in Enion. You were often gone and even when you were home, you seldom paid attention to me. I often wished for a father who would wipe away my tears as a child. I don't know that I understand the change in you, but I'm glad that my father finally appeared when I needed him the most."

Chapter Eighteen

We reached Enion on the evening of the next day, thanks to a hell-bent, night ride through the depths of Mistelwood along mist-shrouded paths known only to Vale Foresters. As we approached the palace, the dying sun set all the colors of the rainbow dripping from its burnished towers. My breath drew sharply at the sight and my throat closed slightly. A sense of longing overwhelmed me—this was the one place I wanted to call home. Unashamed, I wiped tears from my eyes.

Peer met us alone in the courtyard.

"My Queen?" I asked.

"She is well," Peer said.

Relieved, I slid from the horse and nearly collapsed.

Peer caught me.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Artemis and I haven't slept much in two nights." I gathered myself together. "What has happened here in my absence?"

"I received your message to guard Graymalkin. But it was to no avail. I don't understand how he did it but he escaped. The men guarding the entrance to the room never saw him leave."

"They wouldn't have. He left through a tapestry."

Peer shook his head in disbelief.

"How is that possible?"

"I'll explain later. Did he take anything with him? A weaving for instance?"

"No."

I sighed with relief. We still had the Enion Tapestry.

"That keeps us one step ahead."

I rushed up the stairs of the palace. Peer and Artemis followed closely.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I failed you."

I swept his apology aside.

"At least my Queen and you are safe. Now what have you done to secure the Shadowloom and my weaving room?"

"Guards doubled in the hall; two more posted at the top of the stair; after Graymalkin vanished, I placed four in the weaving room itself. No one has been allowed near it since he left."

I grimaced. I had no way of knowing if my niece and her brothers could find a way into that room with the Shuttle. I had to check it out immediately.

"Come with me. I hope...everything is fine."

We hurried through the loftily arched entrance hall and into the main portion of the palace. Artemis hesitated at the threshold to the dining room.

"Mother," she said.

"Go see her," I said. "Tell her everything. Tell her I'll be by shortly to explain it all to her."

Artemis kissed me lightly on the cheek and disappeared up a polished stone staircase to our right.

Peer stared after her, a puzzled frown on his wide face.

"Much has changed in the last four days," he said carefully.

"And I have much to tell you, old friend, but first the loom."

We skirted the smokewood dining table and entered the hall leading to the nether regions of the palace. Extra metal sconces holding torches now cast a bright light throughout the corridor. Peer handed me my key as we walked. We passed a silver-framed mirror I had not noticed before. I saw my reflection- wild, unshaven, eyes haunted with worry, clothes torn by the reckless night ride with Artemis. My image rippled as we walked, going in and out of focus, as though the mirror reflected more than just the person in front of it. I realized how exhausted I was by the stress of finding and losing the Shuttle, coupled with fear for Enion's safety.

Ahead of us guards jerked to attention and scattered out of the way as we approached. I opened the door and rushed through, Peer right behind me. We followed the spiraling way downward through the gloom.

"Did you find what you were seeking at the cave?" Peer asked.

"You know about that?"

"Queen Adella told me."

It made sense. I had disappeared again with cryptic instructions for Peer. They would confer and tell each other what they knew.

"Yes, and within the same hour lost it again. Which is why I must make certain all is unchanged here. Otherwise Enion could be destroyed."

We followed the rest of the long way down silently and came out onto the corridor. More lanterns had been added to the passageway and the light at the far end still blazed. I took that as a good sign. Still, I was cautious.

"If the guards are dead, go back and protect Della and Artemis," I ordered Peer. "Get them out of the palace and leave me to whatever is in that room."

I turned from him and his hand grasped my shoulder and spun me back around. He said nothing, just stared at me with those dark eyes of his. He drew his blade and held it between us.

"I have had my doubts that you were Qweg since you first arrived. You had the height and breadth and the appearance; the crescent moon beside your eye marked you rightly; but you acted differently. You fought the griffin alone. You also won the hearts of our soldiers with courage and compassion. And on the return from the Battle of Stones, you forgot the little game we play."

I blinked; then I remembered.

"You mentioned the glade was strange to you and waited quietly. You wanted me to ask you to tell your story."

He nodded.

"It annoys you, but there's nothing you can do about it, so you always play along. And now, Artemis treats you like a father, which is passing strange. Never has she thought of you with such affection before."

His eyes bored into me, and he raised the tip of his sword so that it pointed at my throat. "So, I need to know, are you the *real* Lord Qweg?"

Sweat trickled down the valley between my shoulders. I did not draw Thruvir. No man lived who could defeat Peer in combat. Besides, he was doing what I trained him to do, what I had woven into his being— protect Enion and her Queen.

I swallowed in a dry throat and strained to keep my voice even.

"Yes. But I'm not the Lord Qweg you knew. That man is lost, some of his memories gone because of an accident and a head injury. The man before you has changed and, I hope, has become a better person than the one that previously lived in Enion."

Deep wrinkles grooved his forehead.

"I do not know about these things. Is such a memory loss possible?"

"In some cases of amnesia, yes."

"Is it reversible?"

"Perhaps, through time."

His sword did not waver, but I could see in his eyes that doubts wracked him.

"The old Lord Qweg was much different than you. At times he could be a beast like those creatures we slew. Even so, I liked him. At least, I could not help myself but like him. I did not understand it. He did things, unadmirable things. He hurt people I knew and loved, and he deserved to be punished, yet I could not bring myself to despise him. This surprised me since my own sense of justice told me he did not earn my respect."

I opened my mouth to speak and Peer shook his head.

"No, let me finish. When you came back, I witnessed your conduct with the Queen and the soldiers, and I found myself instinctively taking to you. I did not know how that could be possible since before you were a man without any merit who I instinctively disliked. It made me doubt that you were Lord Qweg. I thought maybe you were an impostor. When you stood with us against the beast army, I knew you could not be the same man that had ruled Enion with Queen Adella. He would not have risked himself that day. I suppose your memory loss is part of how you have changed. But maybe it is more than that. Maybe some part of your brain that determines right and wrong, good and evil has been altered and you have changed from a bad man to a good one. The problem is can Queen Adella count on that change to last?"

He stopped speaking, and his face bore the question he could not bring himself to ask: would it be best to kill me now?

I wanted to reassure him but I could not. I could tell him the why behind his behavior toward me in the past. I had found him far off in one of the Umbra's realities. I had taken this lump of human flesh and fashioned him on the Shadowloom to be brave, loyal and protective. Peer could not help liking me since I had woven that part into him. And yet, in spite of all my machinations, I had not accounted for the manifestation of his humanity. True loyalty is a matter of respect earned by honor and sacrifice. He gave his loyalty easily to Della because she embodied those traits. To feel loyalty toward Lord Qweg must have been puzzling beyond reason.

But I did not tell him all of this because his doubts would still remain, and that sword of his would stay pointed at my throat. Enion's safety demanded that he make a decision one way or the other so that Della's and Artemis's lives could be guarded. So, I said the only thing that made sense. They were words that the old Lord Qweg might have said in falseness to preserve himself. The difference was that I hoped Peer would hear in them the sincerity to protect my family.

"If you have any doubts, slay me now. Next, destroy the Shadowloom in that hall so that it can never be used again; burn the weaving of the Black Castle; and last of all, safeguard the Enion Tapestry for the rest of your days."

He considered this for what seemed an eternity while my heart hammered, waiting for his answer. Finally, he lowered his sword and clasped my forearm.

"Let us pray that I never have to do as you have asked."

I prayed too, though for different reasons.

We hurried forward.

In the flickering firelight I saw the Shadowloom standing in the center of the room, the Earth Tapestry stretched from its heddles, Tintagel Castle looming menacingly in the glare of the firelight. The guards saluted as we descended the stairs. Behind the loom, the weaving of

Enion still nestled in its alcove.

* * *

I stood on a balcony overlooking Mistelwood where it crept up on the palace. A large and brassy moon cast silvery strands of light, glancing through smokewood trees and snowberry bushes. The air smelled of salt tang with a hint of rain in it; I watched a line of clouds above the sea's horizon darken and grow and slide inland toward the moon.

A footfall behind me. I did not turn. I could tell by the fluid sound it belonged to Della. Soon she stood beside me, gazing into the forest. Her jeweled hair smelled of lilac. When at last I turned toward her, I noted her chin was at the level of my throat and with a negligible upturn of her head, our lips would meet. I sighed and let the thought go no farther.

"So," she said, "the changes I've seen in you are the result of an accident?"

I nodded.

"I suppose I should be grateful for any reason of it."

"I'm sorry if the new and improved Qweg isn't to your liking," I said.

"That's not it."

"Then what is?"

The star in Della's eye flashed like a crystal in sunlight.

"Artemis told me how you gave up your chance to repair your mind in order to save her life."

"There really never was a choice," I said. "She's my daughter; I could not see her hurt."

"Yesterday there was no choice. But what about tomorrow if your amnesia ends, and this man, before me now, goes away?"

"I can't answer that. But for now, I want only to be that man you see standing here."

A quiet little sob escaped Della, and a tear trickled down her cheek onto her chin.

I did what any man would do. I took her in my arms and soothed her with soft kisses in her hair. We stayed that way for several minutes. When she stopped crying, she did not pull away.

She spoke softly into the side of my neck.

"When first you came to Enion, you were gentle like this. You wooed me and I fell in love, dazzled by your charm. Only after we were married did you show me your callous side. Even then I still loved you."

She laughed bitterly.

"Love is very funny and equally cruel," she continued. "I could not take myself away from you. I thought our lives would change for the better when Artemis was born. But you became even more cold and distant. You doted on her every so often but ignored her most times. Once she entered adolescence, you had nothing to do with her. After that I no longer allowed you in my bed. When you disappeared the last time, I was glad and hoped you would stay away forever. As the days and months passed by, it looked more and more like you would never return. When you showed up, I was afraid...afraid that I would fall in love with you again."

Her hands found my face. Her fingers stroked the stubble of my beard. She kissed me lightly. The coolness of her mouth brought back body memories of vast pleasure. But I did not press myself upon her.

She cried a little more and I dried her tears with kisses.

"I've been bluffing all this time," she said. "I have fallen in love with you again. But I find

out it's all because your brain has been injured."

I stroked her hair, remembering the softness of it against my face.

"It's ok. I don't mind being hurt."

"You don't understand. How can I say I love you and pray at the same time your mind never heals?"

I pulled her close. My mouth found hers. Between kisses I murmured something about never wanting to be well again if it meant her unhappiness. I think the animal instinct part of us took over then. Unaffected by memories, we went to her quarters and loved deeply.

Chapter Nineteen

I awoke in the early morning, untangled Della's fingers from the hairs on my chest and slid out of bed without disturbing her. A gust of wind rattled the jewel-pane windows and rain streaked the glass. Della stirred but did not waken. I was glad. An idea battered at the gates of my mind, hammering to escape, and I didn't want to pick up again where we left off last night—not yet, at any rate. I had to follow that idea until I was certain it played out entirely.

I dressed quickly and left her rooms, carrying my boots, intending to go to the kitchen where a pot of coffee would stoke my brain processes.

Peer stood guard outside Della's door. A smirk lined his face and he looked like a proud, grand uncle who helped the young lovers outwit the parents for a night.

"Hear anything interesting?" I asked dryly.

"I'm no lecher," he answered. Then he frowned. "Queen Adella has fallen in love with you again."

"And that makes you unhappy?"

"Only if the change in you is impermanent."

I nodded.

"I intend to make the new Lord Qweg irrevocable," I responded quietly. Of course, I didn't have any idea how to do that yet. I continued down the hall in my quest for caffeine. Only, the idea blossomed suddenly and stopped me. I stood a few moments, turning it over and reflecting upon it, but I saw only one way to act and I would need help.

I returned to Peer. "Meet me in the dining room in half an hour. I have something to check on first."

I padded down the hall toward my quarters.

It seemed like a month since I had been here last, so much had happened in just a few days. I went to the desk. From the shelves I retrieved Sun Tzu's book and the two pieces of paper I had placed within earlier. I opened them and studied the signatures. They were supposed to match. I am no handwriting expert, but scrutinizing the two, the signature on the long letter from Merlin was different when compared to the scrap of paper.

I sat down, and from the desk drawer, took out the bottle of ink and a quill pen. Dipping the quill in the ink, I scrawled Merlin Skye beneath the signature on the scrap about the Shuttle's disappearance. I stared and held my breath as if that would somehow alter what I could see was true. The scrap and my own handwriting matched exactly.

I don't know how long I sat, staring at the two signatures. I noticed first that the quill pen had snapped in my fingers. Ink also spattered across the desk where my hand had struck the bottle. None of this mattered. Only that the man I had declared war against, the brute who had scarred and persecuted his children, the devil who I had promised to slay for Della was myself.

My memory loss had hidden this truth from me. Now my fleeting remembrances began to make sense, and the fractal pattern of my life emerged clearly—the strange words, the quotes from people I could not recall, the bizarre events that cropped up in my dreams, they could only have originated in a world where Merlin had lived. Of course I was Merlin and Qweg. What Shadow Weaver would create a single world to inhabit when he had an infinite number of worlds in which to revel?

I tried to divine a different outcome, some way of explaining what I discovered. But I

recalled the look on Morgan's face as she faced me at the lake, demanding the Ixtlan Shuttle. It wasn't just hatred, but a loathing so deeply embedded that only my suffering could expunge it. Her hatred was personal, directed toward the man who had made her suffer the indignities of being a slave.

I did not blame her or any of my children for hating me after what they had endured by my hand. They had just cause to revile me. I was a criminal, my actions those of a deranged individual. I wished at this moment that I had been a different father, had showed them the beauty of the loom instead of the dark ugliness I had created with it. Maybe if I had been more generous in my spirit and with their rearing, I would not have faced the challenge I did now.

My thoughts continued along these lines for some time. I don't remember how far or how long I spiraled down that slope, but at some point the violent part of me welled up and crushed it. Self flagellation might be good for the soul but it never solved a problem. Empathy was as far as I would go. It is useless to point out that the emperor has no new clothes and laugh and deride him for it. Buy the poor bastard a pair of pants and send him on his way. My only choice was to find a way to set everything right. I would not place myself at my children's mercy because they would show me none. Besides, Enion's safety was involved. I could not know for certain that they would not destroy it since Merlin Skye had crafted it.

I should have left then to meet Peer, but I still had one more puzzle to explain. I took the letter I found in the book and once more wrote my signature beneath the other one. The forgery was a good one, good enough to fool a man wearied by the tumult of amnesia and the events of war swirling around him. It shored up the illusion that Merlin and Qweg were bitter rivals. Morgan, Macbeth and Gareth had very nearly succeeded in their revenge.

I went over to the fireplace, set a match to the two papers and watched as they burned to ash.

I locked my room and headed for the dining hall. Peer waited for me with coffee and crullers. I gulped a cup, hot, the brew singeing my palate, and wolfed down a couple of the twisted sweet cakes.

"Come," I said and led him into the hall. The mirror was darkened and cast no reflection. Maybe it showed what future awaited Qweg. Not that it would have stayed my plan; I was too far along now to stop. I wanted this mess to end for everyone. I could see only one way to do that, and I would need my wits about me to make it succeed.

We descended silently to the weaving room. At my insistence Peer had placed twenty more guards under Gawain's command in the room the night before. Now I dismissed them all and waited until I could no longer hear their boot steps in the corridor.

I went over to the Shadowloom. Though the Earth Tapestry stretched vibrantly alive on the frame, now that I studied it closely, I could see that Merlin's figure looked as blotchy as Tintagel's ruin. Lengths of thread on the nearby spindles shone ghostly in the firelight, their multi-hued colors glowing from within. I took a few strands and overlaid them on Merlin. One or two could have come from him.

I unbuckled Thruvir and leaned it against the timbers. I slung my cloak over the stool as a cushion.

"Peer," I said, "guard my back."

His sword appeared in his hand. He took a position beside the loom that dwarfed even his own massive frame.

I began sorting through the moonglow filaments, laying each one against the weaving—separating, discarding. Two clumps of threads slowly grew on the spindles beside me. Absorbed

in my work, I didn't notice the passage of time. More than two hours passed before I was satisfied that all the strands belonging to Merlin's image on that tower were accounted for.

I stood and stretched the muscles in my lower back, buckled on Thruvir and threw my cloak over my shoulders. I gathered the bundle of Merlin's threads and placed them in the pocket of my cloak.

Peer had been waiting patiently this whole time. Now I became aware of his steady breathing. His eyes bored into me.

"Where are you going?"

"To salvage what I can of this life."

He nodded.

"What if you don't come back?"

"Carry out the orders I gave you last night. Destroy this loom and guard the Enion Tapestry."

He grasped my shoulder in one huge hand and squeezed it tightly. "Good speed," he said.

I nodded and loosened Thruvir in its scabbard. I placed my hand against the tapestry's image of Tintagel. Iciness at first on my palm...then warmth spread outward like ripples in a pond; I smelled the char of burned wreckage. Pressing forward until my upper body extended partway into the picture, I peered into gloom and glimpsed fallen stone and timbers in the castle's courtyard. I pulled back and slid my hand until it rested on the tower's balcony. I wanted a place without any dark corners where someone might hide. Once more I pressed forward. This time I made out the turret and the sky surrounding it. Satisfied that nothing would jump out of the shadows at me, I picked up the slender ivory comb at the loom's base and wedged it into the opening I had formed with my body. Caught on the threshold between both worlds, it should keep the doorway open and give me a way back to Enion.

I slipped through the threads of the fabric...and onto the battlements of Tintagel's remaining tower.

A cold, moisture-laden wind clutched at my cloak and swirled it around me. A banner displaying a unicorn and lion rippled on the turret above. Ravens wheeled and dove in the sky, their raucous cawing breaking the eerie silence. The air smelled foul, and far below I could see a cloud of brown-orange vapor and through it the shadowy outline of a great city. The faint sounds of cars and trucks lifted upward on the wind. I experienced the deja vu of standing often on this lofty perch, surveying this Shadowloom world of Earth. Suddenly, staggered by the view, I fell back against Tintagel's black stone, shaking.

The air crackled with the beginnings of storm, raising the hair on the back of my neck. I thrust my hand within my cloak and clutched the bundle of threads— my past, restorable and so near; they gave me a sense of solidity. Then the hunger in them to be rewoven into my being flared urgently. Wincing, I let go.

Taking a deep breath, I gathered myself together. A slight shimmer of static in the air beside the battlements marked the portal between this world and Enion and steadied me even more.

I found the stairs, which I had traveled in my dreams, and descended them to the courtyard. Shattered stone lay everywhere. I picked my way through the debris into the main hall and to the spiraling stair. The way downward was in complete darkness.

Returning to the main hall, I found the kitchen and rummaged through the litter of pots, kettles and broken crockery until I found a lantern intact and full of fuel. I lit it and went back to the stairway.

Downward I turned and turned in the gloom, my light casting shadows on the treads and outlining my passage like descending the path to hell. At the bottom, the corridor was cold and dank. Dampness trickled down the walls and my footsteps echoed with the faint squish of water.

A weak light filtered through the weaving room's smoke-smudged, jewel-pane windows, adding marginally to the lantern's luminosity. My eyes adjusted to the dimness, and I saw the Shadowloom battered and broken on the flagstone floor—a pile of jumbled timbers and twisted metal wire. Once, this wondrous machine of polished wood, braided silver cable and glinting jeweled cogs had thrived like a living being, its heart beating with the fierce echo of the Umbra; it blended thought and idea with will and the fabric of chaos to breathe life into a tapestry. And now it lay on the floor like a shattered toy.

I walked down the steps and went among the debris. The tensioning wheels' gems glittered throughout. The comb lay bent and twisted, wide gaps among its smooth, needle thin teeth. The heddles wound around everything, knotted and kinked by the splintered wood beams. The loom appeared a lifeless thing; still, I wasn't going to take a chance that it could be resurrected. I took off my cloak and set it aside near the stair, then went over to the cavernous fireplace, and using some of the lamp oil, set a fire going. I laid smaller fragments of the loom onto it first. The larger baulks I hacked into pieces with Thruvir and added to the blaze.

A garish light filled the room. Gathering another armload of wood, I spied beyond the loom's wreckage twenty alcoves, and in all but one hung tapestries. The weavings were smoke and soot stained but I could still make out their bizarre images forming twisted realities. The single empty recess still showed a shadowline where one weaving had been removed. I figured it must have been Thereon.

Shuddering at my handiwork, I turned back to the hearth and worked steadily. Sweat beaded and ran down my face. I removed my shirt and soon my skin glistened red from the scorching heat. I laid the silver strands of wire in the makeshift furnace and watched them blacken and curl and spread out and ooze. At times the wood seemed to shake like an animal trying to escape its fate. I even imagined I heard a low howl of anguish.

The fire had consumed nearly all of the loom when the sound of running feet came from behind me. I turned and saw Gareth panting at the head of the stairs. He still embodied the contorted, gnomish figure of Graymalkin. He must have fled into the Earth tapestry when he left Enion.

"No! No!" he moaned. "You've destroyed us. Damn you!"

I crushed the cruel part of me that wanted to answer his anguish with a smile and kept my face expressionless.

"Come down, Gareth," I said softly.

He cringed and backed away.

I held up my hand.

"I know the truth now. I'm Merlin Skye in this world and Lord Qweg in Enion. I won't do any more harm to you."

He descended the stairs charily. The metal scales of his tunic rippled orange and red in the firelight as the ungainly hitching motion of his clubfoot rolled and twisted his body with each step. As he neared, I saw a bloody bandage on his right forearm. Fear sweat dripped from the end of his grotesque nose. He glared at the burning logs.

"If ever we had any doubts to your heartlessness and cruelty, this dispels them all. You've condemned us to exist as mockeries for the rest of our lives."

"That will be for a very long time."

"We know it!" he shouted.

I hefted the last timber and threw it on the fire. Sparks sailed upward on the superheated air. The embers crackled and heaved. I thought a bit about what I was going to propose and set it aside for the moment. I wanted answers first.

"You drugged my food the night I arrived at the palace?" I asked.

"Screw you!" he cried.

"And you forged the note from Merlin in my quarters?"

"Go to hell."

I leaned against the wooden mantle of the hearth. It was warm against my skin.

"All of us might spend time there in the end." He glowered at me but said nothing. "All I want is to find out what lay behind your intrigues before I tell you what I propose to do about it."

His head cocked to one side and his face lost its grimace. Maybe he sensed a ray of hope in my tone. I certainly counted on him believing I had a proposal. It would keep our conversation from being one-sided, at least.

He said, "I would love to take credit for the food. But I didn't do it. It must have been one of Qweg's many admirers among Queen Adella's followers."

That made sense. It would have been hard for him to go into the kitchens unnoticed by any of the drudges or cooks.

"But you forged the note from Merlin to Qweg that I found in my quarters."

"Macbeth faked it. He practiced your handwriting and signature. The note in your jeans was real though. He tore the page from your journal and placed it in your pocket before he and Morgan dumped you on the beach in Thereon. They hired the slavers to come after you too and drop the hint about your Enion name and title. We had to have you thinking about the Shuttle and Merlin from the beginning."

My son cackled and I thought the dwarf madness threatened to break through. He controlled himself with a mighty effort.

"Too bad you escaped so soon. We wanted you freed after you were branded and whipped. A taste of your own medicine, which we thought would goad you into hating Merlin so much you'd never question anything."

I smiled in grim appreciation, for I agreed that it would have worked and made the ruse a success.

"Who set the beasts to attack Enion?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know. We were as surprised by that as you, but we didn't interfere since it distracted you. We didn't want you to have any time to figure out the situation. So we pressured you continuously in order to keep you off balance and searching for the Shuttle without delving into who you were."

This surprised and worried me. It meant someone else was in the game, hiding in the shadows. But I kept the concern from my face and said, "You came very close to succeeding. I didn't catch on until this morning."

He lost his smile. He pointed at the fire.

"It doesn't matter anymore anyway. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades."

In the next moment he giggled and twirled about several times. I wondered how much longer he could hold himself together.

"Gareth..."

He stopped and winced.

"Don't call me that. I can't stand to hear it."

"Graymalkin then. It doesn't have to end this way."

He stared fiercely at me, his blue-gray eyes scanning my face as though searching for some clue to the real meaning behind my words.

"What do you mean?" His fists opened and closed spasmodically.

"Merlin Skye is dead."

My son laughed.

"But not forgotten. He exists as a part of you, residing inside your putrid personality like a cancer."

"Not so. Whatever part of me was Merlin, you destroyed when you excised the threads from his image in the Earth Tapestry."

I went over to my cloak and came back with the bundle of fibers I had culled from the weaving. They glowed like foxfire against the flames.

"From the beginning I wondered why my amnesia was so precise. I could remember a name and a face but everything else around it was a blank. Not even a flash of an image. Nothing came to me except in dreams, and they were jumbled symbols of my life for the most part." I stared at him. "You removed parts of my mind when you removed those threads."

Graymalkin giggled.

"It was a delicate operation, but a successful one. It left you with enough faculties to continue as Qweg and guide us to the Ixtlan Shuttle."

"I suppose I'm lucky you didn't leave me a vegetable."

"The thought occurred to us, but you were the only one who could lead us to what we wanted."

"And when you got it?"

"We planned to restore ourselves as we once were so that we could live normally, not like the hideous creatures you made us into."

"You really think that would have happened?" I asked.

"The three of us swore an oath on it."

I laughed harshly.

"Your sister isn't going to allow you and Macbeth to restore yourselves. She can't afford to."

Graymalkin's eyes narrowed and his smile disappeared.

"You're lying."

"You know I'm not. She's afraid you'll want to keep the Shuttle for yourselves."

"We made a pact to share in it equally!"

"Don't be naive. You already tried to sell her out to me. What do you think she'd do for it? Or Macbeth? The power of a god rests in that device. With a Shadowloom you can be anything. Emperor of a universe if you desire. Do you think she'll let either of you have that power? If Macbeth gets it, do you think he'll let you share in it?"

I gazed down at my son. A worried look spread across his face.

"It doesn't take much for the Shuttle to corrupt a person, turn him into a deranged monster," I said gently. "I know; I've been insane for years and just now returned to my senses."

Graymalkin licked his lips and stared at me. His eyes flashed angrily.

"You'd say anything to get your hands on the Shuttle."

"Merlin would because he couldn't live without the power it gave him. But Qweg is lucky. Because of you, he's found his humanity again." I held out the bundle of threads. "All of Merlin

Skye is right here."

My son's eyes widened and his breath caught.

"What are you saying?" Graymalkin's voice became a narrow squeak.

"Give me the Shuttle and I'll restore you."

"You must think we're pretty stupid to fall for a trick like that. We can't trust you and you know it."

"You can't trust Merlin. But Lord Qweg will do it."

"And if we don't agree?"

I unfolded the threads of my Merlin life until they hung loosely in my fist.

"Give your brother and sister this message. If the Ixtlan Shuttle is returned to me, I will make the three of you as you once were. I'll make this world and the others like it whole again and turn them into the paradises they should have been in the first place. If you don't, when I return to Enion, the only remaining Shadowloom will be dismantled; its pieces cast back into the Umbra. If the three of you had a thousand lifetimes you'd never find them. And even if you did, none of you know how to put one together. You'll stay the way you are now until you die."

"They won't believe you. They know Merlin too well. I know him. He would not honor his word."

I stepped close to the hearth. The threads were weightless rays of starlight, yet they carried the substance of my life and weighed heavily in my hand. Casting them away, I would lose my connection to the past; I would lose knowledge that might be used to protect Enion, Adella and Artemis. But I had to believe that a man is defined by his actions. All that I once was would be nothing compared to what I was about to do. I held the threads beside the fire.

Sensing my intention, Graymalkin screamed. "Wait!" His eyes bulged and sweat coated his face. "Don't you want to know your past? Where you came from? Why you made Enion? How you won the fair Adella's hand?"

The threads glowed against my skin, and they pulsed with an urgency to be rewoven into my being. A shudder swept through me as I felt the demands of my own flesh to reincorporate them. But Enion could only be safe without the demented specter of Merlin hanging over her. Adella and Artemis would live free of fear only if Merlin were gone forever. I answered my son by tossing the threads into the flames. They disappeared in a crackling shower of sparks.

Graymalkin gasped.

"Merlin's dead," I said. "There's only Qweg, Lord of Enion."

I gathered up my shirt and cloak and headed up the stair to the tower. Graymalkin hesitated, staring at the fire, then followed. I made my way to the tower's balcony. Rain had still not fallen. The wind had stiffened and pennants cracked from their poles. The sky was a dark mass of clouds. Lightning flashed a red spider web across their swollen underbellies, and thunder followed in a vast, deep rumble.

A shimmer of blue static at the edge of the battlements told me the comb still wedged a passageway between worlds. Peer waited for me on the other side and with him Adella and Artemis. I thought of my pledge to Della to kill the man responsible for all of Enion's troubles. He was now gone and Enion would be safe. Then I recalled my promise to my other daughter to teach her the art of a Shadow Weaver. I hoped she would understand that I could not keep my word. It was too dangerous for anyone to know that craft. When I finished restoring my children and the worlds and returned Nemesis to her true form, I would take the Ixtlan Shuttle to the nearest lava sea in the Umbra and cast it in.

Rain started to fall and I stepped toward the doorway.

Graymalkin grabbed my cloak and held me back. He grinned up at me; large drops spattered his cheeks.

"One thing you haven't considered," he said. "Your image on the Earth Tapestry . . . who weaved it in the first place?"

I shrugged.

"It doesn't matter."

He started laughing.

"Of course it does. They're going to want the Shuttle back."

I jerked in surprise.

"Who...?How...?When?" I started to ask.

With unexpected strength, he shoved me through the doorway and I fell into Enion. He tossed the weaving comb after me, and the opening between the Tapestry Worlds closed, silencing the echoes of Graymalkin's laughter.

I landed at the base of the loom. Peer helped me to my feet. He must have overheard Graymalkin's warning because he asked, "What are we going to do now?"

"Defend Enion," I answered automatically.

His eyes narrowed and he scrutinized the tapestry. "Most likely your children are seeking the Shuttle's powers even now. We could stop them easily."

I followed his gaze and stared at Tintagel and my children's images alongside the tower. It would be so easy to pull their threads; they would vanish and Enion would be safe. My breath caught; the temptation was great and I could feel the abyss looming. I turned from the weaving, and taking Peer's arm, guided him out of the chamber.

Every individual is part of the prosperity of a world and to break off even a portion of a life is to hurt the whole, an ancient figure from Earth's history had warned me.

"We'll have to find another way," I said, forcing my voice to remain even. "And that way lies somewhere in the Umbra."

The End

Mark Reeder currently works for Centre Communications as a writer researcher for educational videos. His short fiction has been published on the web at Deep Magic, Quantum Muse, and Dark Planet. The science fiction fantasy novel, "A Dark Knight for the King," co-authored by Ron Meyer, is available from Publish America as a POD through Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com. He has a Master's degree in history from the University of Cincinnati and has studied the martial arts for thirty years. Mark lives in Boulder, Colorado.

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Bring Me the Moon

By Colleen Anne McAndrew

The air tasted different…gritty, dusty, dry. He resisted the impulse to bump the humidity control. The suit's filters, the sensors, knew better; it was only his mind that told him that up here on the rocks it must be dry.

He climbed. The rocks not so much rose as erupted from the uplands in petrified dizzying spirals. There were no clear paths, only splits and fissures more or less negotiable that obscured any trend in the ground-level; but his legs knew he was climbing—even more, his heart. His mind followed the rocks, wandering through convolutions—no need for thought here.

In Shannytown below, they had been the same: pack and suit sold indifferently, warnings and datasheets issued flatly, payment before delivery, no thought past their petty work. They took no risks on the rocks, except a few with Guideguild badge and wage. He had refused Guideguild service—anyone raised on Aetna knew the rocks as well as they did, which was to say not very.

Shaina would have laughed at him. Fine heroics, she would have said. Heret, my cousin, off to Shannytown like any day-tripper, hiking the rocks like a boy out to look big. Watch the *gubdna* don't get you, she would have said. Day-trippers worried about *gubdna*, carried handheld prods and zaps the stupid rockcrawlers would have laughed at, had any been left. No one knew there weren't, he had argued once. She had bubbled with laughter and said oh, well in that case there must be elves and fairies and little green men—no one knew there weren't! He felt tension leave him, remembering. Much better her laughter than….

He shied away from that. Much better think of Shaina laughing than the endless, mindless tedium of rocks. The rocks caught the mind's eye, coiled and wrenched from Aetna like live things twisting and stretching away from some horror behind them. He was twisting himself now, worming through a cleft that scraped at pack and chest but ought to lead to something more….

"Something" arrived unexpectedly. He sprawled, shoving against resistance that fell away. He landed with a grunt, nose against faceplate, entirely too near the smooth uneven floor. The rocky shades and streaks twisted, too, dark rust fading to orange to sandy-pale in undulating hollows. He shoved it away, pushing to his feet. Lucky the floor was smooth here; the suit was cheap and might have torn. He tugged at jacket and trousers, checking hip-seal, cuffs, collar, gloves…all secure. The sensors showed no loss of air, not that that mattered here—there was air, flat and un-nourishing though it was. Higher up, where he meant to go, a leak would be deadly. He breathed, long and slow, assuring his racing heart that there was air.

Standing, he scanned the basin wall—a spiraled arch broke it *there*, an alley between two hill-flanks *there*, a crack that might have been a blind lead, or might not, across and to the right *there*. Three or four jags of rock that might hide additional ways. *Enna, menna, polla, tenna*…he heard the rhyme still in Shaina's voice, nearly her first words on Aetna, pretending not to know which passage led home. He had believed her, not realizing that of course she had studied the station beforehand; amazing her young cousin was a side-benefit. He chose the hill-alley; it lay in the right direction, and what he could see of it sloped upward.

They were *an-ellil*, cousins of the fourth generation from the common ancestor in direct line of descent. She was two years the elder and an anomaly on Aetna: born beyond the Moon yet choosing to return. The others, he as well, had loved Gran Radda's stories of beyond the Moon, beyond Neirai even, out of the realm of the familiar and verging on legend. Only Shaina was impatient of them. She had rather hear of Jollin, Gran's husband, courting amid green hills, sweeping her off to new worlds where he had promptly died. "He was a lovely man," and Gran would smile like a dreamy child, "he would have brought me the moon, if I asked him." And more so, until the cousins shouted her down. Romance like so much else was foreign to the life of Aetna.

The hill-path rose startlingly fast, riding the shoulder of an escarpment that fell away almost under his feet. A spur of rock arched across an implausible canyon, the sides jagged lines into plunging shadows. Pebbles and shards shifted underfoot. He stepped with care. Fragments crackled loose as he took to the spar, but no better path offered, here. He went on, stooping to grasp any rock that seemed firm, scarcely trusting his feet. The sides of the spar bulged outward; the unaccustomed pack shifted with each motion. Move slow, turn, test every hold…he came to the crest and stared down. It was the first such vista he had seen among the rocks. The further wall was a little higher, the dips and basins less deep, among the same tortured columns. He descended, precariously turning to slide feet-before.

With the canyon out of view, breath came easier, though depths still loomed to either side. After many minutes, he slithered past a hump and came to rest at the base of the spar. Ground and footing were firm to either side. He leaned gratefully—sucked water from a collar tube—gulped with little thought. He closed his eyes.

Soon enough he roused. For Shaina's sake he must go on. He climbed, bracing against the swelling rocks, past the limits of rubberneckers and boys, past what flat Shannytown knew. Shadows and arches flicked past hardly seen. Unthinking, he chose such open paths as fell between them.

Until a honeycomb gate fell away, and he saw the Moon.

Not Neirai, the parent satellite, bulking greater than Aetna and with more life. The Moon was small to the eye, no more than the height of a man, a frosted imperfect sphere in the deeper sky. Unconsciously, he climbed faster, gazing upward. Neirai loomed unheeded; Neirai held no help for him. The Moon was nearer, a child clinging fast to Aetna, not stirring from its station, though both hurtled through space. It was too far and too fast for his untravelled mind—for him the Moon was still, though Neirai wandered.

Shaina had smiled, too wasted to laugh when he came to her. She lay against the pillows, wandering…he knew it, though she feigned well. Darting glances gave her away, questions begun and quickly stifled; seeing and hearing and following what was nothing of this world. It was a documented progression, too well-known by far. He had doubted, at first, seeing her languor, her less-ready chatter. Before the end there had been no doubt. Before he left her she was nearly gone, unresponsive, staring blankly through him. But that was later. For a time at least she knew him, what had happened and what he aimed to do…and how hopelessly. The virulence had no cure. Still he had begged her, tell me what will make you well! She knew him,

she knew *it*, at a stage when lucidity should have gone…*know* it, he had said, you know what is living in you; tell me what will defeat it!

And she had smiled. Bring me the moon, she had said, and smiled like bubbling laughter. A day later she did not know him, babbling still; a day and a night again and she lay silent…but yet alive.

He climbed. The rocks burst about him, petrified eruptions of the world's torment, dry and barren of life to his untrained eye. The sky darkened above him, a deeper blue, midnight blue, velvety black flecked with stars. Wrapped in the suit, he was cold, the chill of emptiness biting where air could not. Breath came harsh in his ears. He strained to see in the half-dark, where shadows sliced sharply and light itself was cold.

The rocks were rust-red, streaked and twisted yet. He scrambled upward, mounting a wracked arch towards the highest point. The shell here was ribbed and grooved, offering handholds now and shallow scrabbling steps. The depths gaped vainly, no more than pictures of a world remote and far. From this arch to the next on a sweeping stair; worming through under a bridge that crossed his way; grip and shove and stretch in unthinking motion, with eyes only for the Moon and the path that must take him there.

At the peak of the arch he stood, wobbling: the pinnacle of the rocks, the world's high point, beyond the tenuous blanket of air and life that clung below. Neirai bulked in the sky, a bright near-tangible presence against the dark. The small hard-edged arc of the moon stood out against it. He felt himself buoyed up, insubstantial under the wheeling stars. The worlds overhead were more real than the rock under his feet. He tensed, legs flexing. Almost, he was laughing.

At last he jumped.

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Hunter's Moon

By K.C. Herbel

The killings started shortly after I arrived at Lithos. This aptly named planet was undoubtedly the prototype for other rocks I've been on—barren, cold, and lonely. Lonely. I breathe lonely.

First rule in my business: don't make friends. Not that spacers go out of their way to get cozy, but too many ties can make you vulnerable, careless. That's why I keep my small circle of friends to Earthers. Besides, my clients never want anyone to know I've been there. I take care of the trouble, everyone sleeps better, and I collect my pay on my way to the spaceport. So you'd think I was used to the solitude, but drifting alone through the turbulence of bustling colonies is nothing like being stranded—the last one on a planet. Kinda feels like everyone ate and then split, sticking me with the bill.

And to think, this was only a layover on my way to Earth for some R&R. I had just finished a whole string of jobs in the outer crescent, near the disputed territories. The last, on Silva 3, had been a bad one. That's what I thought before I came to Lithos.

As I was saying, that last job was pretty bad—pretty bloody. Not so much for me. I mean, I wasn't dying or anything. My bones were mostly in the right spots, but I was definitely feeling roughed up. And my insides were all bare feet and broken glass. I hadn't slept for days. Every time I closed my eyes I saw the bodies of his victims—Bouchier's. And the sick monster himself. I knew he was dead. I pulled the trigger myself. But still, he haunted me.

Now usually I don't take the black pill on jumps. I don't like the way it makes me feel—after. On the other hand, I do like the sensation of jump. Besides, I usually got the creds for business, and I get a kick out of exploring the ships. But this time I was real tired, and I—I didn't want to see Bouchier and his house of horrors. So I sucked down that pill like the last gulp of air in a spacesuit.

As I settled into my jump-couch, I scanned the blackout chamber. This girl caught my eye—with a sprinter's build and a dancer's strut. She had olive skin and long, black hair like silk. Her eyes were unfathomable pools of green. I peered into them, for only a second, and my heart skipped a beat, as if synchronizing to hers.

She took a pill from the attendant and walked to a couch near mine. I felt a strange urge to say something to her, but I kept my mouth shut.

A minute went by as I waited for the pill to kick in. The dark-haired beauty was still on my mind. I had to look at her again, so I leaned out to take a peek and caught her taking another pill from a different attendant.

Is she nuts?? I thought.

Everyone knows two black-holers will kill ya! So I was about to call out and warn her, when she slipped the second pill into a pocket.

Now why didn't I think of that?

Suddenly, the attendant blocked my view with her face and asked, "Is there something I can get for you, sir?"

At that moment, I realized my hand was still sticking out, from when I went to warn the girl. It seemed oddly unattached—to me or anything else. Before I could ask for another pill, the

fingers started to multiply and I plunged into darkness.

Even though I had a black-holer in me, I dreamt of the girl. Don't ask me how! All I know is she was there in my head—in the dark.

* * *

As requested, the attendant woke me when the *Bucephalus* entered Lithos' system. She gawked at me and asked, "Is anything wrong, sir?"

I finished scraping my tongue across my teeth and said, "There was something wrong with the pill you gave me."

"Oh, yes," she said, "the taste can take some getting used to."

She got full marks for understatement.

I stopped short of complaining about the dream I'd had. She wouldn't have believed me, and it seemed stupid to complain about something so agreeable.

I climbed out of my couch and looked for the girl, but she was missing. I grabbed the attendant and asked if she knew where the "young lady" had gone.

She looked straight into my eyes and said, "What lady is that, sir?"

"The girl sitting in that couch," I said.

Again, she stared at me and said, "I don't remember any girl, sir…but then I see a lot of passengers on these crossings."

I argued with her for a minute. Got nowhere. She simply didn't remember. I guess the girl didn't have the same effect on her. But by this point, she'd got me wondering if I dreamed up the whole girl-thing, so I decided to go to the observation lounge and check out Lithos.

I sat in the anonymous dark of the lounge, sucking down a cold one, staring out the viewing port, and comfortably merging with the cool, soft, vinyl couch. I ordered eggs with a bottle of catsup and watched the red dot of Lithos grow into a planet with two moons. By the time we circled the closely orbiting satellites and synced our own orbit over the colony, my black pill hangover was a dull drone.

I sat and watched the first wave of shuttles launch. I was in no hurry to get to the surface, so I decided to take in the view.

From orbit, Lithos looked like a big, rusty doorknob. The surface was pocked here and there by shallow craters but was otherwise smooth and barren. The only noteworthy blemish was a circular area directly below us, which looked sorta like cobwebs. To the west of this, there was an enormous, hurricane-like storm.

"That's the colony," honked a nasal voice from behind me. "And that's the Maelstrom."

I turned to see a scrawny, disheveled man wearing thick-rimmed eyeglasses. I say scrawny, because he was having trouble carrying his own briefcase. I looked down at the beat up, brown leather of his case and fought back a laugh. The only time I had seen a briefcase like that was in a museum.

So this guy held out his hand and said, "Rodger Meeks, Industrial Infomercial & Recruitment."

I wasn't looking for company, unless it was the girl, but he held out his sweaty hand until I took it. As I feared, he took this as an invitation to plop down next to me and tattoo his life story on my eardrum. After a few minutes of hearing him blather on about his exploits as a mining company headhunter, I was wishing he had an off-switch. I'd already tuned him out to a low burble, but his tune was in such discord with my hangover that it re-energized to settle the

score.

I felt my stomach and right hand tighten into fists, but I got up and crossed to the view port rather than decking him. A minute later, Rodger reappeared and placed a fresh drink in front of me.

"I'm sorry," he says. "New job. I still get a little wound up sometimes."

I nodded and returned my gaze to Lithos. Rodger took a sip from his drink and followed suit. We stared at the planet, each of us counting our chickens to be hatched on it. Rodger's eyes told me he was calculating the bonus from all his recruits who would soon be reporting for work in the mines. I, on the other hand, was thinking of her—the girl.

I know. Why all the fuss over someone I'd never met—over someone that might only exist as a drug-induced fantasy in my mind? I couldn't tell ya. But even with my head still fuzzy, my instincts were clear: the girl was real. She had to be. And more than real, she was different—significant. I couldn't grasp it at the time, but what I was feeling for her was the germ of a need.

Rodger woke me from my daydream with a poke.

"You see that over there?" he asked, pointing at a long, glossy object between the moons and us. "That's *The Dragon*. Fastest jump ship around!"

"Really," I said. "I booked passage on her for day-after-tomorrow."

"Oh. So you're Earth-bound."

"Yeah."

"Boy! She sure is…"

Before Rodger could complete his thought, an intense flash of light burst from *The Dragon*. Our ship listed sluggishly as if struck by a wave. There was an uncanny silence, and then the collision alarm sounded. A moment later, the *Bucephalus* was shaking and everything was rattling, including my teeth. Then quiet.

I scanned *The Dragon's* widening debris field through the port, and I knew.

"This is gonna be a bad one."

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Julianna's Awakening

By Aline de Chevingy

Julianna followed her prey's tracks into the Kingdom of the Dwarves. Intent on the few tracks in her path, she stopped cold at the breathtaking beauty before her. She'd expected the land of mineral ores to be dirty and dark. The stories she'd heard told of the Dwarven Kingdom could never compare to this sight. The twin moons Aysel and Itzel had just begun to descend as the sun rose, illuminating the copper-colored formations. She wasn't far behind the dragon demon and his slave—perhaps a day, two at the most.

She'd overheard them talking in the demon's courtyard before they left on this journey many months ago. If she was honest, and she always tried to be, they hadn't been talking, they had been arguing. That alone had been a surprise, to see a demon arguing with his slave. To see how much he enjoyed the argument disturbed her and convinced her to rescue that slave. Watching as the slave risked her own life to save her demon had shaken Julianna's belief in her cause.

She searched the trail in front of her, trying to find any trace of her prey—a footprint in the rock dust, lying along the base of the mountains from years of elemental beatings—a whiff of smoke on the wind from their campfires. Looking up, Julianna saw the crevices and openings in the mountain side. She knew that as open as this Kingdom's lands seemed, its open-aired landscapes were deceiving in appearance. An ambush could be lying in wait behind any one of those openings, just waiting for her to let down her guard.

Cursing her own stupidity, she pulled her sword from its sheath as quietly as she could and made her way through the passes with more care.

The twins climbed across the sky towards their zeniths, illuminating the path before her. Julianna found her first signs that she was on the right trail. She came across their campsite, the embers from the fire still warm under the top layer of soot. From her crouched position by the fire, she scanned the area for traces of their current direction. A thin hard smile crossed her lips; she'd made better time than she thought. They couldn't be more than a day ahead. Perhaps the girl was becoming immune to the demon's coercive spells.

Julianna hoped that were true. It would make getting the girl away from the demon much easier. She'd lost the girl to the demon once. She wasn't sure why he had spared her life when he'd appeared to reclaim his slave, but she wasn't going to lose her again. All humans deserved their freedom. That thought alone kept her going, and this time when she found them, the demon was going to die.

* * *

Tores lovingly watched over Miya's sleeping form beside him. He still couldn't believe she'd agreed to share his bedroll.

"For safety," she'd said. "In case the dragon slayer returns," she'd continued quickly.

Tores had swallowed back the smile that threatened to appear and adopted a serious expression as he agreed with her logic. He'd been royally happy his father had finally agreed to allow them to continue their search on their own, taking the injured Raton with him. Their

relationship was too confusing for him to attempt to figure out at the moment. He had more important things to worry over. Miya was his main concern. He hadn't the time for anything else at the moment. He'd been faintly surprised that his father had given Miya his blessings before leaving, telling Tores how much he liked and approved of his choice. Not that Tores cared if his father approved of his mate.

Stroking back her hair, a grin tugged at his lips when she murmured his name in her sleep and cuddled closer. He knew that when she woke, she'd be angry and aloof at having reached out to him. At this moment that didn't matter. His body ached to have her in his arms, to kiss her like they did in the shared dreams while she was the dragon slayer's captive. He now had hope that she would be his; all he needed was her assent.

Sensing her stir beside him, Tores debated his next move. He held himself still unsure of her reaction to him as she slowly woke. He watched her eyes as memories from the previous evening flooded back to her.

"Good morning, Miyalia. I trust you slept well?"

"Good morning, Tores. Did I oversleep?" she asked him quickly, slipping out of the bed roll.

"I would have enjoyed a few more hours of rest with you at my side." His decision to tease her had been completely spur of the moment. She'd looked so uncomfortable at the sight of him beside her; he felt an urge to help her relax. Even if that meant making her angry with him. He liked how she looked when she was angry. The way her nose scrunched up, her eyebrows dipped together and her forehead showed those deep frown lines at her annoyance with him. She looked beautiful to him, especially when she was annoyed.

"Oh… I… Shouldn't you be getting up? We really should keep moving. We need to find the dragon slayer. I believe she called herself Julianna. Please, before she kills again."

"We will, Meamorea." The look of disbelief she sent him brought out the grin he'd been holding back.

"Tores, I don't fancy ever being at either Siyamak or the Daragon's mercy ever again."

Tores scowled, a low throaty growl emerged from his lips. He stood before her in one fluid movement and gathered her in his arms protectively. The fact that she laid her head on his chest and let him hold her this way told him how frightening that thought was to her. Their bond responded to her emotional state, pulsating, tightening around his heart at the threat of losing her.

"I will never allow anyone to harm you, Meamorea. Not even the GODS themselves." His arms around her tightened when she stepped in close instead of trying to pull away. His dragon blood screamed in victory at her small act of acquiescence. "Shall we gather our belongings and start off?"

"In a moment. I'm enjoying this."

Tores grinned at her lightly teasing tone and held her closer. "Shall we return to bed, then?"

Her entertained laughter rang through the shallow cave they had chosen as their camp site, bolstering his spirit even more. "You never quit, do you, Tores?"

"Not once I know what I want—what I need to make me happy." He could sense her pulling away from his words. *'She wasn't ready to hear them just yet.'* he thought. "But this isn't the time or the place to discuss our future." Tores released her and stepped away to start gathering their few possessions to continue on their journey. "You coming along?"

"Don't you dare take one more step!"

Tores had his back to her when she'd ordered him to stop. A huge grin spread across his

face at the extremely annoyed tone she'd used on him. "Yes?"

"Where do we head from here? We haven't seen a single trace of the slayer in weeks. I think we may be going in the wrong direction."

Tores turned back towards her, sobered, his grin quickly replaced by a thoughtful expression. "Yet we both sense that the slayer is nearby?"

"Could she be behind us? Could she have realized we were on her trail and slipped behind to become the hunter instead of the hunted?"

"You, my Meamorea, are the expert Huntress of our group. I bow to your superior knowledge. So tell me, Miya, shall we allow her to catch up with us?" He'd expected many responses from her, but panic was not one of them.

"Have you lost your mind? Julianna wishes you dead. If she catches up with us, she'll kill you."

Tores cupped her cheek affectionately. "Is that worry for my safety, Meamorea?"

"Oooh you can be so…so aggravating at times. Tores, you're—"

"I feel the same way, Miya. We have a unique relationship, we two. We have no secrets left between us. How about we make a deal."

"What kind of deal?" He adored her suspicious nature. It's what made his little huntress such a good thief.

"You protect me from the slayer, and I'll protect you from everyone else."

Her frown told him she didn't agree. "We agreed to protect each other."

Tores took her into his arms and held her close. "You win, Meamorea," he whispered into her ear.

"Isn't that sweet. He's lying to you. Get away from him before he uses his coercion spell on you again, girl!"

He felt her stiffen in his arms at the sound of the Slayer's voice. Miya steeled her shoulders and shoved him behind her, determined to protect him from Julianna.

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Oren's Blade

By Aztec

"What are you waiting for? Move!"

What if she killed him now?

Just snaked out a hand and tugged at his boot. Sent him sprawling down the treacherous slide of twisted orange rock.

Flint stared at the boot, imagining her fingers closing around the dust-thick leather. Yanking—

But the image dissolved, vanishing into the dry winds scouring her exposed skin. He was solid. Immovable. Glued to the thin ridge stone that formed the dangerous path they had to follow. Grit stung her eyes. She would need more than her physical strength to dislodge—

"You can't kill me, Flint."

That was her other problem. The emperor had bound her to him, and Lucas was thoroughly enjoying the benefits. Occupying a place in her head. And the obvious fact that her magic was useless on him.

"Just daydreaming, Lucas." Flint pushed, her legs taking the strain, and her fingers grabbed at the sharp edge of the ridge. Lucas' hand gripping her arm, pulled her. She scrambled to her feet, trying not to sway. Trying not to stare down—

Fingers crushed the bones in her arm. "Keep still."

"What are you? Part mountain goat, too?"

A smile cut his mouth. "Give you another reason to hate me?"

Flint tugged her arm free. "As if I need that." She blew out a slow breath and kept her eyes fixed on the ridge of orange stone that snaked out toward The Mouth. The damn thing was only a few feet wide. Why wasn't there an easier way to get… Her eyes flickered. Not looking down. Not looking down. "Just do your job. Get me to that hole."

Her hand flicked to the great arch of stone far ahead of them, thick with black shadow. Smoky blue sky beyond it, and already the edge of The Child touched the rock. Soon it and its companion, The Mother, would sink, sink and then—

Flint tried to block those thoughts.

The Emperor had forced her into this, threatened her position in the Inner Court—to strip her of her estates, her title. Without them, she would be nothing. Disowned. Dispossessed. Not the life she wanted for her children.

No. Not thinking about them. She couldn't dwell…because she would have to run.

She'd known there could be…consequences…to this. The loss of her magic.

Her heart clenched.

Hunting for a mystical weapon, half lost to legend. Pointless. But she had no choice.

"Walk where I walk."

Lucas' soft growl broke through, and Flint scratched a shaking hand over her tightly woven hair. Slow, even breaths. All right, distraction. That could take her mind off.... She focused on the back of Lucas' head. "You never said why you agreed to this."

"Orders."

"Even then—"

His head snapped back, and she was staring into the shine of dark, dark eyes. "I am a loyal servant of the Emperor. He bound you to me." A sneer formed on his sharp features. "I can hear the chaos of your mind. Magic. It's…" He shook his head, his eyes crushed against… something. "Repulsive."

Flint covered a broad smile with her hand. She bit at her lip to stop herself from laughing. "Really?"

Dark eyes speared her again. "Find it amusing," he muttered. His gaze turned back to the slowly sinking moons. Her eyes had to follow him. Her heart squeezed. "They're setting." A sharp smile cut his mouth. "And all that chaos will be gone. So think it funny, Flint." A grin. Bright. Vicious. "I get to watch you die."

She blinked. And again. The word choked out. "Die?"

A harsh bark of laughter. "What did you think? They had you dragged up here for the view?"

"I…I thought…" She stared at the gaping Mouth again. Her heart thudded in a tight chest. Breathing was hard. She could only taste bitter, dry dust in her mouth. She swallowed. It didn't help. "I thought my Blood, my Magic would point—"

Lucas laughed harder and turned back to the thin, snaking path. "—To something that's been coveted for millennia?" The increasing winds whipped away more of his laughter. "It's been waiting for you. And it's called The Mouth for a reason."

Panic took her.

Her children. She couldn't leave them—

Run.

Anywhere.

Just.

Get.

Away.

Strong hands held her, gripped her shoulders and shook her.

"I'm not a sacrifice!"

"Yes, you are."

"But my Family is influential in the Inner Court. I was told—"

Lucas' eyes narrowed. "Whatever they told you is a lie." He shrugged, and a hand lifted to trace the faint stains marring her face, her throat. "Your Magic marked you." A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Marked you out. Only one pattern can point to Oren's Blade."

Her skin prickled at the almost touch of his fingertip against her Tattoos. "And the Emperor thinks it's me."

"He knows it."

Lucas turned, his fingers now steel bands around her wrist, his boots sure, confident on the thin rock. Flint stumbled after him, dislodging stone, hearing the dribbles skitter down to disappear into deep shadow. He was wrong. He had to be. He was Wolf Blood. What did he know? "No. This is insane. I'm a Mage. The Emperor doesn't waste us…"

"…like he does my kind?"

Her heart was a stone. "Yes."

"At least you're honest." A flash of a hard grin. "Very rare in a Mage."

"I pour magic into the rock. It seeks out the Blade." Talking aloud. Talking to herself. Lucas was wrong. He was. Her eyes flickered over the great curves soaring high above them, crossing, recrossing each other in a maze of rock. "It'll exhaust me. Drain me. Maybe for years.

Maybe forever.... I knew that. But it won't *kill*—"

"Believe that. If it makes you happy."

"You're enjoying this!"

"I get to see one of you die. After my—after the Northern Mages butchered scores of us…"

"And that's why you volunteered." Flint let out a bitter laugh. "Think about it. They lied to you."

"No."

"Believe that." She paused and found his eyes on her again. Her smile was arch. "If it makes you happy."

Lucas growled, a low deep sound that lifted the hairs on the back of her neck. The flash of pointed canines. The silver-grey flush to his skin. Flint breathed. Slow. Sure. Cal Lucas was a senior officer in the Wolf Guard. That meant he had spent years—*years*—fighting for the Emperor. And survived. Flint made herself hold that dark gaze, ignoring the spike of gold in the black depths. He was close to Shifting. She could feel the darkened air around them fizzing.

"You can't kill me," she said, her voice cold, steady. Her eyes narrowed. "You're bound by your orders."

"You will die, Flint." A grin that showed the long fangs. "And whatever The Mouth doesn't eat, I will."

She held down a shudder—held onto the centuries' old hate that had burned since Oren's time. "My bind to you will end after those moons set." She matched his smile. "I'm a Rock Mage. I can seal you in a living tomb. Insane, you'll drag out the centuries, the millennia, until time takes down these mountains."

The gold spark died in his eyes, and the flush faded over his skin. But the smile remained. His finger tapped her forehead. She stopped a flinch. "I know you." He dragged her along the widening ridge. "And that's not who you are, Flint."

"You don't—"

"Oh, I know you." He paused. "Intimately."

Heat rushed to her cheeks. He was Wolf Blood. For him even to suggest…and for her to react to that suddenly soft, dark timbre.... Unthinkable. She swallowed and willed herself calm. "I've killed enough of your kind."

"Believe that…"

His voice trailed away, and Flint fought down the surge of raw anger. He was just a common Wolf Blood. He knew *nothing*. That the Emperor had bound her, when her husband—

"We're here."

Flint stared.

The Mouth soared in a great arch above her. The sun's dying rays still warmed the orange rock, but thick shadow spread. The sky was already fading, darkening around the gentle shine of the moons. Flint faced The Child, its larger companion sliding slowly, inexorably behind it....

Carved steps rose around the dark side of the arch and Lucas dragged her behind him. A ledge and a deep-cut alcove. He shoved her.

"Stay."

Flint couldn't argue. The stone grabbed at her, desperate for the Magic in her blood, searing through her mind. She fought for control. Tried to will back the white-hot rush…she couldn't. Flint bit at her lip until she tasted blood.

This was wrong. *Very* wrong. Stone didn't demand...couldn't. She was a Rock Mage.... Her eyes crushed shut and her heart thudded.

What if he was right?
That she would die in this stone chamber.
"Lucas!"
"What?"
Dark eyes burned through her.
"My children. Please!" Tears wet her skin. The moons, so close now. She could feel the hum through the chilled rock. Anything she could do. Even him.... "The Emperor will reward you. Please. Make sure they're—"
The moons. Perfect. Terrifying.
Tearing…
Magic, her magic, streaming, ripping from her body.
She was going to—
The Mouth screamed.

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To the Shores of Triple, Lee!

By A.M. Stickel

"Aw-right, Defectives, fall in! Welcome to Camp Alpha. I'm Sergeant Lee… That's 'Sir' to the likes o' you, greenies."

"Sir, yes Sir!" we sang out, hating Lee already with all that was in us.

Still groggy from our passage through the light gate, we raw recruits looked around, entranced by the stark wilderness. Triple was a planet aptly named, being only marginally larger than the furthest of its double-moon sister bodies. Both visible by day, they hung in the blue above almost close enough to crush us. Unofficially dubbed Cue and Eight, our scientists had named them Primus and Secundus in a language older than the game of pool.

After Lee finished putting us through pointless drills to check what he called our 'cellular reintegration', we got the "At ease, Troopers."

The red-and-brown striated rock where we'd made camp looked to me like salt water taffy frozen in mid-pull. My buddy, Reston, said it reminded him of old chewing gum gone mad. But our relaxation was brief.

"Hor-USS! Guard duty." I yessir'd Lee and quickly took up my position opposite Private Solberg's on the high rocks above the camp, becoming part of Triple's sculpted landscape in my red-brown camo.

Reston was assigned to dome-setup. After saluting Lee, he slouched off half-heartedly with the others and a mumbled "See ya' later, Horse."

We did meet again a few Terran hours later in the chow line, where I intended to do right by my nickname. Private Wolfe, across the table from me, dug into her share and honored her own handle, ignoring Reston and I as we elbowed each other and winked. Finally, we just gave up and carried our trays outside into the warm sunshine.

"When do you think the Dryl and the E-Lur will join the party, Horse?"

"With the Dryl, you can count on their shamans making a big ceremonial hoo-ha first. The E-Lurians always consult their computers to make sure they have everything exact down to the last nano-dot. Both races worry more about losing face than we Terrans do. Nope, we'll always stake first claim because we don't wait for permission from the Great Invisible, or from some inanimate hunk of bio-metal, either."

Reston chuckled and added, "N' we don't give a half-chort for face!"

Suddenly, we were in cool shadow. I flinched, expecting Lee to be there. But, when I looked up, Wolfie stood over us, wiping the gravy off her chin. "Horus, Reston, mind if I join you?"

Without waiting for a reply, she plunked her pretty behind on a nearby rock. "Ouch!" Her tail scorched, Wolfie was up again in an instant.

"We were going to warn you about that, but you were too fast for us," I said. "These rocks'd make this place too hot for E-Lurian comfort. And the Dryl are too superstitious to deal with two moons hanging around so close."

"I still think there'll be a fight," said Wolfie, crossing her arms. "Well, they'd better show up for the showdown before I get tired of the synth-grub."

Reston gave his wheezy laugh, and then agreed in his own way. "They're going to try to save face, just like they always do. Then, we're going to wipe some more of it off when they try."

Wolfie fanned herself, mopped her brow and took a swig from her canteen. “With a whole galaxy as our genetic swimming pool, we end up on the rim of the pool with two other humanoid races! What are the odds of that? Maybe there really is a Great Invisible.”

I looked around and lowered my voice. “Don’t let Lee hear you joking about it. Solberg told me Lee’s grandma was Dryl. I think that’s how he comes by calling us pureblood Terrans ‘Defectives’ like the Dryl do.”

Reston held his sides and hee-hawed, “How about that—a Dryl Sergeant!”

And so, Reston’s big mouth got the three of us stuck on permanent latrine duty. Why? Because the next shadow over us was Lee.

* * *

The three of us made a great team. Between us, we worked out a way to rig our blasters in tandem so that they dug the latrines faster than our laser shovels had. We figured we might never see action, so why not make use of our weapons in a practical way.

Lee was proud of our ingenuity, meaning he was not as mad at us for wasting blaster power as we’d thought he’d be. He’d watch us sweating out our shift, showing up when we least expected, solemnly saluting and asking, “How’s the Dryl-Team doing today?”

“Sir, fine Sir!” We never said anything to our comrades, too ashamed to admit to our private joke. And Lee honored our silence with his.

As day after day passed—under those mismatched moons—we saw no sign of our rivals in the humanoid race for territory. Sergeant Lee, though, took their absence as a purely temporary oversight. “It’s not like you’ve seen in holo practice, Troops,” he’d say. “When it happens, it really happens. War is blood, stinking guts and frying flesh. The Dryl will freeze-ray you with cold ceremony and the E-Lur will vaporize you with hot frag. After it’s over, and they’ve found face, they’ll parlay and exchange hostages. With them, the order is always: (1) shoot to kill, (2) talk it over, and (3) kiss and make up.”

The day they came, latrine duty—and Lee—saved our lives. Many in the troop were caught in the open. Lee was with us. “Get into the hole, NOW!” He didn’t have to repeat the order. The E-Lur and the Dryl, while they were strafing each other, just couldn’t pass up the chance to catch us with our shields down. When the shields went up, we four found ourselves on the wrong side and, literally, in deep doo-doo, but alive. The real fun of the fight for first rights to the world of Triple had begun.

Our refuge, fortunately, was one we’d blasted out that day and had only used ourselves. Wide enough for the larger two of us—Lee and I—to stand on the bottom, the latrine hole was deep enough for Wolfe and Reston to stand on our shoulders without head exposure. Surrounding blaster-hardened walls helped brace us, as artillery shocks rocked our world.

Trooper indoctrination had included the details of our rivals’ torture methods. Dryl grilling called for chemical drugging; the E-Lur injected captives with nanites. Then they’d simply wait.

We Terrans reversed the strategy by letting the enemy waste their firepower against our impregnable shields. Said enemy tried hard not to damage property they were after so as not to alienate their tax-paying, procreating public. Since they did a lousy job of protecting the landscape for the proletariat, their governments were forced to call in Terrans to repair the damage and public sentiment. The fanatic Dryl and the ascetic E-Lur disliked cleaning up their

own messes.

BRAK-AK-AK-AK-AK! POW! The sky glowed crimson.

After that close one, Reston was first to break our unspoken no-talk pact. "I think I'd rather be Dryl-drugged than stay down here much longer. Horse, I don't know how you guys can stand it where you are."

Wolfe and Reston had their arms around each other with her head on his chest. And here he had the gall to complain! I waited for a pause in the blast noise before I growled at Reston, "Sarge is meditating."

"Go ahead and climb out, Reston, if you're not anxious to celebrate your nineteenth birthday or see your buddies enjoy theirs." Lee always did look on the bright side for his solutions. I abetted him by gripping Reston on the shin above his right boot top and squeezing hard.

"Okay, okay, you guys. I'm sorry I said anything," Reston whined.

"I think I'm gonna barf," admitted Wolfe, shifting.

"You wouldn't want to do that to us, Wolfie," I said, reaching up and giving her leg a gentler squeeze than I had Reston's, adding, "Reston, give her one or two of them fizzy chews you always carry."

Pretty soon I heard crunching sounds and ungraciously blamed Wolfe. With a closer look, though, I realized that the crunching was marching feet. Too soon, the feet were poised on the brink of our prison. What I saw, before a bright light blinded me, made me wonder why I'd ever left my nannies in the crèche to become a soldier. It also convinced me how absurd the rumor was about Lee's grandma being Dryl.

While the rest of us stood gaping, wetting our pants and trying to shrink into them, Lee's blaster was out and fired. A terrible howl and a thud told me I'd heard my first Dryl join the Great Invisible…not any too soon for me.

The next thing I heard was my beloved sarge saving our lives for the third time: "Out! On the double! Head for the shield and don't look back."

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Walking the Rise

By Auren Faire

"Only the dead walk the Rise." A breathing mask muffled the old curse from Enforcer. They were a superstitious lot. Lying quietly on the floor of the skimmer, Krill wished for the pain to ease. He shivered in dread. They were taking him *there*. Taking him to the Rise.

Vultures cried overhead, making him flinch. *How soon 'til they find my body? How long before I become the hunted?* Despair caught his heart in its dark grip. The skimmer bounced, slamming Krill against the cold metal of the shield wall.

His already bruised and battered body exploded in agony. Clenching his jaw and tightening his dried, cracked lips, he kept the cry internal. Squinting his eyes, he waited for the pain to subside. Controlling his breathing allowed him to roll on his side. White-hot agony gripped his chest. *Keep it under control.* Not a whimper escaped. If he cried out, they would stun him again.

The neuro-cuffs on his wrists and ankles locked his nerves, locking his muscles and keeping him from moving far, so escape wasn't an option. For now.

Only the dead walk the Rise. A promise, a threat. They were almost there, almost to the desert, the Rise. Krill breathed deeply, preparing for the coming fight of his life. Muscle failure would occur when his body reacted to the release of the cuffs. He had to position himself so that he could take advantage. They would never let him live. Not now.

Opening his eyes into slits, he looked around. The desert sand swirled on the floor of the skimmer, making his eyes water from its painful attack. Cursing the loss of water, he tried to rub his eyes on the cloak he still wore. A glint of metal caught his attention, and Krill eased his movements slowly, so as not to draw attention. *There it is again.* A piece of metal, just out of reach. They'd have to release the restraint on his nerves in order to move him. He smiled. Hope rose in his heart like a phoenix.

Sweat ran down his back in thick rivulets. Krill's heart jumped in his chest. He shifted slightly, using a rocking motion to move closer. A fist of electricity hit his back, sending him into slight convulsions. His already locked nerves screamed at the abuse. White lights and black dots exploded across his vision. He couldn't stop the shaking of his limbs or the cry of anguish that escaped his hoarse throat. Darkness sucked him into oblivion.

"Move it, abomination." A raspy chuckle brought Krill from darkness. Abomination. They called him abomination. Tingling hit his limbs in full force. They'd released the neuro-cuffs. He almost cried in relief while holding the screams from his body's reawakening in check. Moving slowly, he opened his eyes.

Heavy breathing echoed from the respirator on the mask. "You won't bring death upon us. The dragon can no longer hear your lies, traitor."

Krill had told the dragon his vision, a blasphemy. He hadn't meant to tell anyone, but he'd been on a dream quest. Like all others before him, he'd needed to tell someone before the images swept away. The stone statue in the garden guided him to speak. He *knew* it. Peace had settled in his heart when he touched the talon of the statue, and for the first time, he could see the destiny of his people.

The desert, for years, had encroached upon their world as the waters of his land fought the

pull of the two moons. His vision had shown a world where his people were blessed with water and life. The diseases of the north were obliterated, but the palace had fallen before a mighty army of dragons and their riders.

The dragon held his own council, even when Krill was brought before the priests and accused of blaspheming the great regime. Enforcers snuck him out of the city under cover of darkest night, before the two moons could rise after the sun set. The dragon, he was told, never stayed in one place for very long, but none knew how it moved. It disappeared shortly after his arrest, and rumor persisted that it didn't reappear. *The dragon is found when it chooses to be found,* a common saying.

Krill rose to his knees, his legs screaming in agony. He lowered his eyes, allowing his long black hair to cover his expression. The Enforcer grabbed his arm, jerking him to his feet. Agony shot through Krill's arm at the devastating grip. His feet gave out, and he hit the shield wall before sliding to the floor again. Rage fueled his heart. Staring at his useless hands, he realized that he was on top of the metallic object from earlier.

Work, by Luna's breath! Work! His mind chanted to his hands, praying to the dragon that the nerves would allow him to grip the weapon. He fell forward, using his long hair as a curtain to cover his hands gripping the small blade. Odd for them to drop it.

His fingers, numb at the tips, gripped it carefully, hiding it in the folds of his cloak. All of his hopes for survival relied on this one object. *You're a fool, Krill. You know nothing of survival in this wasteland.* Despite his mind's objections, Krill's heart forced him to stand, taking all the agony without a murmur.

The Enforcer eyed him cautiously and with what appeared to be some respect. He stepped away from Krill, keeping his hands at his sides. With agonizing slowness, he made it off the transport and down to the sands. Krill saw no one else. *Probably watching from the air-conditioned pilot car*. He curled his lip in disgust, throwing his loose hair over his shoulder.

The sun would rise soon, and with it, his death. Pulling the stunning rod from its sheath, the Enforcer stepped toward Krill. Krill urged his feet to keep moving, but he wouldn't make it before the rod hit him again. He hunched his shoulders in preparation. *Please let me fulfill my destiny, what you need of me. Just no more pain.* Wind began to howl, swirling the sand around him like a cloak. The Enforcer cursed, and Krill tried to make sense of the view before him.

This time, the sand did not blind him as it did in the skimmer. Instead, it formed a barrier around him, attacking the Enforcer. The whirling mass flowed outward, creating an immediate sandstorm.

"Thank you, dragon." His cracked lips lifted in a painful smile, but Krill's heart soared with his newfound freedom. The wind tugged at the canteen around the Enforcer's belt, so Krill walked forward, his steps steadier. He clawed at the canteen, cutting the tie from his belt with the blade. He turned, running where the winds of sand opened a path.

The way was clear. Screams echoed from behind him, but Krill was caught in his vision once more. *The path. I see the path.* Darkness enveloped him, and the cool walls of his asylum invited him to follow.

Soft blue light reflected off the walls of stone the further into the crevice he moved. *I've never seen anything like this.* His heart thudded in his chest. Taking a quick sip from the Enforcer's canteen, he moved forward. The vision had grayed, so Krill was, once more, on his own.

He grasped the blade, steadying it with his closed fist through the gap between his fingers. A trickling sound tickled his ears, and Krill moved quietly. His legs had stopped aching a while

ago, so his movements were fluid. Blood roared in his ears. *Step. Step.* He took a soft breath. *Slither.* "What..."

A howling shriek, heavy in anger, pierced the dark, hurting Krill's ears. Before he could finish his sentence, a solid form slammed him against the wall, holding him by his throat. The blood pulsed in Krill's brain, throbbing to escape the confines of the hold. *I don't believe this!* His mind railed against another capture. *I never wanted the vision! I didn't want this!*

"Welcome to the Rise, pitiful creature. Your visions are nothing, as I am the darkness of your dreams." The voice rasped Krill's soul, driving ice into his self-belief. "You have traveled all this way to die." His feet could not reach the ground, and the hand of the mighty darkness squeezed harder. *This was it.*

White and black spots tickled the edge of his vision while pressure built inside his brain. With one last drive, Krill slammed the blade down, aiming toward the face of his captor. Another shriek echoed from the mouth of his attacker, this time in anguish.

Krill fell to the ground, coughing, trying to catch his breath. He still held the tiny knife, thankful to the dragon for his protection. Running toward the light, Krill prayed for more guidance. *Show me your will, mighty one. Show me my path.*

"I am your path." The darkness whispered to his heart.

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A Bit of Karma

By Nicole Sherene Goethals

She gripped the nearest piece of furniture, an old hand-me-down dresser given to her family by some aunt or uncle when she was a baby. She mentally envisioned her fingernails peeling through the varnish as she tried to focus her energy inward. Even she feared her own anger.

"How could you, Steven?" Her words were muttered through clenched teeth, and her grip on the dresser became painful.

"I'm only doing what's best for you, Melanie. He's no good."

She spun around to glare viciously into his eyes. "And what right do you have to decide who's right for me? Just who the hell do you think you are?"

His eyes narrowed as he took in her harsh words. "I was doing you a favor, lil' sis. See if I do any more for you."

"I didn't ask for your help, Steven!" She raised her arms, hands clenched tightly into fists. "I really liked this one. He *meant* something to me. Can't you understand that?"

"All I understand, Melanie, is that he's trash, and no good for you!" Her brother turned to leave the room, his decision final.

How dare he call Chance trash? And before she could retract it, the thought was formed inside her mind. It was a simple thought, rash, a single sentence.

I wish you were dead.

Her hand leapt to her mouth, as if she had spoken the thought out loud. Steven hadn't noticed. His back was turned as he walked down the hallway toward his room.

Then the scene shifted to the next afternoon as she watched in horror as the drunk driver blatantly disregarded the red light and screeched through the crosswalk. Steven didn't notice the car in time. He was looking straight at her.

She screamed.

* * *

Even after three weeks in the desert, it still amazed Melanie how cold it could be after dark. She possessed a thin, shawl-type blanket and a pillow, but she never seemed to be warm enough. She'd considered sleeping in the cave during the day, when it was warm. However, her body could never quite adjust to sleeping during that time. So, during the days she melted, and at night she froze.

She'd been lucky enough to find a cave dwelling with an underground spring. She hadn't settled far from civilization, but far enough to not be a danger to anyone. At least, not to anyone else.

When the moon was full, Melanie was a danger even to herself. Those days were long and strenuous. It's amazing how difficult it can be to control one's thoughts over such an extended period of time, especially in a place with no distractions. But she didn't trust herself around people.

Not anymore.

She glanced up at the setting sun and looked despairingly on the two moons. She

remembered trying to convince her brother that there was a second moon only she could see. The rest of the family would laugh, but not Steven.

"I believe in you, Melanie."

It'd been almost three months since that car had hit him. And it was her fault. No judge in the country would be able to convict her for his murder, but she knew the truth.

In a girl like Melanie, who sees a second moon no one else can find, one stray thought can change a person's life.

Or, in Steven's case, end it forever.

She planned her trips to town with care. She never acquired supplies during a full moon. And she would hum the entire time she visited.

The local townspeople liked to talk about the crazy young girl who lived alone in the desert and always hummed to herself. She didn't care. Let them think she was insane. Maybe they would leave her alone.

* * *

Melanie writhed in her sleep, replaying the same moment over and over. Her brother was standing there and smiling. He had something to say to her, but she'd only just exited the store, and he was on the other side of the street.

It'd been a good day. She'd gone shopping to get over losing Chance. She didn't know what her brother had told the boy, but he wouldn't accept her calls and walked the other way when she spotted him. It hurt. She had really liked Chance, and as much as she tried to get Steven to confess what was so wrong about him, her older brother was tight-lipped.

But she was done being mad. She knew she needed to be more careful with her emotions. They tended to act themselves out. Like the time Susan Mooley had made fun of her ponytails in 5th grade. Melanie had wanted nothing more than for Susan to have the worst haircut ever. She'd come to school the next day completely bald. No one could explain the hair loss, and it eventually grew back, but that was the day Melanie started paying attention to her thoughts.

Steven took his first steps onto the crosswalk, heading straight toward her. He seemed so intent, and he was smiling. What news could he be bringing that would make him so happy? she wondered.

She sensed the movement from the corner of her eye. Her brother was a third of the way across the street. He never even saw it coming.

When the car made contact, Steven flew through the air and landed in the nearby intersection. Cars screeched to avoid hitting the boy lying in the middle of the road. Melanie wanted to turn her head. She didn't want to see any of this.

One of the cars failed to stop in time. Tears poured down her face as she watched the driver roll over his midsection.

"Stop. Stop. Please stop." She cried, but she knew the help she sought wouldn't come and tomorrow night she'd relive the horror again.

She sank to her knees, placed her face in her hands and sobbed. She cried for her brother's life, torn from him too early. And she cried for having such a terrible power. The power to destroy someone she loved with a single thought.

As her sobbing became more controllable, she realized she was still in her dream. "How unusual." She always awakened once she began to cry.

Curious, she looked up at the scene around her. Everything had stopped. Steven lay there,

underneath the car that crushed him. No one moved, not a single sound was uttered.

"What's going on?"

She sensed movement and looked in the direction of the sidewalk on the other side of the intersection. Standing there was a man, dressed in dark clothing and what seemed to be a long tweed trenchcoat. There was something different about him.

Then she noticed it. He was staring straight at her. Even from this distance she could feel his gaze burning into her. And he was smoking. She watched as his hand moved back and forth, connecting the cigarette to his lips and blowing out the smoke. Had she ever noticed him before? She didn't recall seeing him in her other nightmares.

"Who are you?" she yelled across the street.

He began to laugh.

* * *

An old man had once approached her in the mall. She'd been sitting quietly on a bench outside a clothing store, waiting on her mother to finish up. Her mom purchased an ice cream cone to indulge Melanie's patience. All she had to do was sit and wait, and she would get ice cream. If she was really good, and didn't complain, mom would let her choose a movie at the video store on the way home. Her brother never had the patience for this sort of thing and would spend Saturdays with their father. But Melanie didn't mind. Not only did she get a full day of her mother's undivided attention, she also got things like ice cream cones and movie rentals.

As she sat and enjoyed her double scoop of pink bubble gum ice cream, filling her mouth to the brim with tiny pink Chiclets, she noticed a little girl being dragged through one of the other stores. She'd looked so unhappy, being forcibly pulled along at the elbow by her mother. At that moment, Melanie wanted nothing more than to share her ice cream with that little girl.

After about five minutes, the two of them exited the store, and to Melanie's amazement, the child returned carrying an ice cream of her own. It was only one scoop and looked like plain vanilla, but the smile on the girl's face was enormous.

"That's an impressive thing you did there."

She hadn't even noticed that a gray-haired gentleman sat down beside her.

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." She looked into the store after her mother, but couldn't find her.

"Don't worry, child. I won't harm you. Just wondered if you knew what just happened over there?" He tilted his head in the direction of the other little girl.

"All I know is that girl looked really unhappy, and then her mom bought her some ice cream."

He nodded and his fingered brushed over the tips of an equally graying moustache. "You didn't happen to think about that girl having an ice cream of her own, did you?"

It sounded vaguely like she was in trouble for something so she responded defensively. "No, sir! I just thought it would be nice to share mine with her."

"You're a special little girl. Did you know that?"

Before she could think of a response, her mother called after her. Melanie rushed up and grabbed her mom's hand.

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A Night Made For Betrayal

By Joel Brown

The Shepherd took refuge in the cave as the storm broke. He had been out in the hills of Paden Arat since dawn, looking for three sheep that had been carried off by a bear. The entire area was a haven for bears, wolves and other dangers, as well as being a warren of canyons, valleys and dead ends. Rock slides weren't unknown, and at that time of year the storms were liable to cause an avalanche of mud and rubble from the heights. Most of his neighbours thought he was mad, especially for three sheep, but his flock was so small that he couldn't afford to let even three slip through his fingers. So he had left the others with his brother-in-law and set off as the sun rose.

He had tracked the bear, following the river, through the forests of Ahmas and into the rockier hills of Paden Arat. The valleys between the ranges of hills had given him shade from the sun, but they had also hidden the storm clouds that had crept up on him unawares.

The rain had begun to fall first, great drops that soaked right through his shepherd's robes and left him shivering and dripping. His skin had felt like a sponge. Then the wind had begun to blow. It cut through the gaps between the trees like a snake, sometimes wrapping itself around the Shepherd and squeezing the breath from him with its cold grasp, other times striking at his unprotected face with its venomous, icy daggers.

The cave had appeared at just the right moment.

He had clambered up the rocky path, taking refuge beneath the wide branches of the brandle trees until he reached the cave. Once inside, he breathed a sigh of relief, shaking the water off himself quietly. He stepped further inside, eyes down, so it took him a moment to realize that someone was already there, just within the mouth of the cave. The Stranger was old, bent over a gnarled rod, staring into the flames of a stack of flaming logs, and he didn't seem to hear the Shepherd arriving. Careful not to scare the prior occupant, the Shepherd waited until he was noticed.

The Stranger looked up finally and saw the Shepherd. A wary look passed over his wrinkled face.

"Hello," offered the Shepherd. The Stranger simply nodded and went back to contemplating the fire.

"I'm sorry to intrude, but the storm took me by surprise."

The Stranger grunted and peered outside. He seemed surprised to see the rain and wind that were lashing the trees outside. Then he looked back at the Shepherd.

"Come in then," he allowed grudgingly.

"Thank you, sir. If I can just see out the storm..."

"Yes, yes. Come in."

The Shepherd smiled gratefully, and drew closer to the fire. He took the opportunity to study his host a bit closer. He was younger than the Shepherd had first thought. In fact his hair retained a certain auburn lustre beneath his cloak. The Shepherd could make out that same auburn glow in the man's closely kept beard. He guessed that he was probably the age his own father would have been, the Panthion warm his soul. The lines around his eyes were the most pronounced, though the perpetual frown on his lips did nothing to relieve them. He was staring

into the fire with a haunted look, the flames dancing in his emerald eyes. Always uncomfortable with silence, the Shepherd spoke up cheerfully.

"Thank you again for allowing me to share your cave."

His host looked up, wide-eyed as if he had forgotten the Shepherd was even there. "What? Oh... You're welcome."

"That's a storm worthy of Kanthos."

The man snorted. "That's barely a gust of wind compared to the storms I've been through."

"Really?"

"Indeed. I could tell you some stories..."

"What kind of stories?"

The man looked up and really studied the Shepherd for the first time. He felt uncomfortable under his host's scrutiny, but tried not to drop his own gaze. If there was one thing that could be said for him, and it invariably was, he was stubborn. And now, feeling as if he were being tested, he was determined not to give in. Finally, the old man chuckled.

"So you want a story, do you? Well, how about a story of a cursed ship, thrown a thousand, thousand light years from home and forbidden from coming home? Of a captain so brave that great songs were sung of him, and yet who would never, ever find the peace he longed for? And a crew from a thousand different worlds, forced together in a common goal to survive and eventually get home? Would you like to hear that story?" His tone was challenging.

The Shepherd was amazed at the change that had come over the Stranger. A fire, much stronger than the one on the cave floor, had blazed up in his eyes. He had drawn himself up and, beneath his cloak, his whole body had changed, becoming stronger, more masculine. The Shepherd was intrigued.

"Yes. It sounds like a good story."

"Indeed it is. And like all the best stories, it is a true story. A very, very long story. Too long for the time of a storm." He must have seen the disappointment in the Shepherd's eyes. "But perhaps, for tonight, I could tell you a part of it. A part that concerns a night like this, a night made for betrayal..."

* * *

We were in the third year of our exile. Three years without seeing hearth or home, three years of running from the ghosts that we could not lay to rest, of living with the memory of the accursed thing we had done. Three years of surviving in the hope of finding a way home. We had been exiled for a sin so dark that none would ever mention it again, thrown seventy thousand light years from home by Gods we knew nothing about.

The Phoenix was a cursed ship, but she was our ship. She had been a ship of the line, Dreadnought class, built in the star docks surrounding Alba herself in one of the early years of the War. Five kilometres from aft to stern, she was shaped like an elongated pyramid, snub nosed at the fore with a concave half moon at the back. She ran on seven huge steam engines pumping electric current through the corvatite panels that kept us moving through the aether. When she launched, in Year of our Lord 2750, thirteenth year of our Majesty Harold the Seventh, she was the flagship of His Majesty's fleet.

But all those years away from home, far from any type of civilized port, had left us damaged and spiralling into disrepair. We still had a large complement of varin, the spider-like creatures who scrambled over the hull patching holes and effecting repairs, but they were

rapidly running out of the metals they needed. Whispers and rumours raced through the lower decks. Mutiny seemed to hang in the air like a miasmic mist.

All in all, we were in a bad way.

You can imagine, then, the joy when our navigators found an ore-rich world with enough corvatite to repair our panels a thousand times. Captain King jumped at the chance and we set course.

Our navigators were the Three Wise Men. Though blind, they had senses beyond those of mortal man. They joined our crew after our arrival in the Rim Territories, found by our Captain aboard a space port known as Bastion Shadow. That was an adventure worthy of song... And Bastion Shadow would soon have a major effect on our destiny amongst those distant stars. Nevertheless, with their single plasma eye that they shared amongst them, they directed our pilot through aetheric space better than any Thinking Machine ever could. And this time they led us to a desert world in orbit of a binary star, surrounded by seven moons.

Captain King announced the discovery as the Phoenix pulled into orbit around the planet's North Pole. All of us rushed to view ports. We found a world scoured by sand and dust, bare as bones and harsh as space herself. Swirling masses of cloud, storms broken every so often by becalmed eyes and lit up by the sparks of lightning, swept across the surface at frightening speed.

It was those storms that forced the Captain to ask for volunteers. There had been too many deaths, too many failed missions for him to force the hands of any of us anymore. I imagine his crew and they must have held their breath as they waited for us to act.

In the end, fifteen of us volunteered. All from different ranks and spread throughout the ship. Most of us had never even spoken. There was nothing to link us at all. Except that we were all determined that Captain King would *not* return from this mission.

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A Revision of Beauty

By Keri Stevenson

Tamalheim had become stupefied in the sun again, and she would have to climb up to his ledge and rap him on the head to bring him back to rational thought.

Soralingas considered, as she hooked her left hand into the rock above her, shifted her arm, shifted the flap of skin down her side, and then lifted her left foot, whether this was worth it. She did not *have* to take on this duty. She had wanted to, because she had wanted to find out if the claims of wyverns surviving here were true. Even working with Tamalheim had not been enough to deter her.

Perhaps it should have been.

At last she reached his level, and tapped the snake-like head with her right hand. The shapeshifter shook it and turned his eyes—which hovered on stalks connected to his sides at the moment, rather than in the head—to look at her. They blinked hard. Soralingas twitched one lip up, a gesture that would have riffled her whiskers if she hadn't cut them back.

"What happened?" Tamalheim asked.

"The same thing that happened every other time," said Soralingas. She sat back and studied his body, looking for some sign that the sun had hurt him. Of course not; the flat back and long tail, crooked legs and green-gold scales shimmered, alive with health. But the sun dazed him with warmth as well, and without her there, Tamalheim would race in circles, then sit still until the sun set behind the rock formations, at which point he became too torpid to move. "Come on. I want to reach the top before night darts in." She rose, the wind softly stirring the skin at her sides.

"I was comfortable," said Tamalheim, and continued a barrage of complaints that she did not listen to, being too familiar with them.

Soralingas only tilted her head back to look at the top of the cliff. This was the last ledge before the summit. The orange-red rock shone around her, the rich color of cinnabar. An arch crowned the ridge itself, only the swell of it visible from here. Beyond that was a sky as blue as a Dancer's tray, and in that, still sudden and startling to Soralingas when she looked at them, two enormous moons. They looked far closer than they were. That did not soothe her.

Her mind wanted to smooth and soften the rock formations into green hills, to elevate the arch into a silver-blue tower, and to condense the moons into one small pale disk considerably further away. This was an alternate of her own world, but there were alternates and then there were alternates. Soralingas knew of no factors, magical or otherwise, that could have produced changes so extreme.

She shook her head. This very strangeness was the reason that wyverns might survive here, why she hadn't dismissed the claim as ridiculous. She had been here less than one of this world's days. She would give it some time to stop startling her. And, of course, if it showed her a wyvern, all would be forgiven.

"…are right, we should move."

Soralingas brought herself back and nodded. "Do you want to go ahead of me, or should I lead?"

Tamalheim hooked his claws in and scrambled up to answer. Soralingas studied his body.

Was it too lizard-like? Would it really attract the attention of wyverns, who looked more like a cross between dragons and snakes?

Then she sighed at herself and began the careful climb, hand-arm-flap-leg. She had seen wyverns only in images, since they had died in her own version of Taitastalla long before her birth. She might be wrong about them. She might be wrong about these creatures being wyverns. She might be wrong in her fears that Tamalheim would look insufficiently like an intruder to call them out.

She might be wrong about any number of things, so the best solution was to keep climbing.

* * *

"Do you have first watch?" Tamalheim's voice drifted out, slow and sluggish. He spoke the perfectly comprehensible Wild words from a box he carried in the center of his chest, not from his lizard-like jaws. He had showed her once. There had been a great deal of blood when he pried his chest apart and then put it back together again.

"Only watch," said Soralingas, turning her gaze from the sky to the fire. The darkness had only deepened the awe-striking splendor of the twin moons, and she knew that she needed to look elsewhere at times. Part of her panicked every time she looked up, longing for home.

But she had to tend the fire. She had to keep Tamalheim warm enough through the cool night to stay alive. And she certainly had to watch, as—

Ah, yes, the torpor had taken him already. Soralingas stood up and checked the drape of the blanket over him, then stretched out her cramped limbs. She could not have done it while Tamalheim was awake. Well, she could have, but he would have mocked her.

Her sides bulged out as she turned and extended her arms to the sky. Let anyone out there, wyvern or otherwise, watch her and come to greet her, she thought. She wanted wyverns to see her, in point of fact, if they could. She had derived enjoyment from their images over all the years that she had worked at Wildhaven. She felt compelled to offer what she looked like as a gift to them.

She thought they would see spindly limbs, far smaller than theirs, but perhaps calling to mind their own forearms, themselves tiny compared to the mighty hind legs. Her head, pointed ears and slight swelling of muzzle and large eyes, resembled theirs if one was being generous. But her clearest claim to kinship, and what she hoped they noted, were the flaps of skin that ran from her underarms to her ankles, and could unfold and bear her body on the wind like their own great wings.

Well, only from a great height to a lesser one, does it come to that.

But she had seen some images of wyverns jumping off a cliff to gather wind under their wings, too, so perhaps it was still a kinship.

Those were only young wyverns, and usually only in their first flights.

Soralingas despised the voice. It sounded like a combination of Tamalheim and Charee, the Wildhaven agent who had informed her about the case. They would warn her not to get excited, not to hope, to calm down. Disappointments were more common than successes in their attempts to find truly wild creatures in the alter-worlds and bring them back to permanent safety in Wild. She had sought wyverns across three hundred years and three times that number of alter-worlds. She would not find them here.

But someone had seen them here.

She looked up, but saw only moons and dark sky. Perhaps there were stars, but the moons

were too close to let her make them out. Soralingas sighed and bent down next to the fire, added a few sticks, checked on Tamalheim, and walked a beat of the camp.

She should feel at ease at here. This was the wyverns' home.

She didn't know if it was.

She didn't know that it wasn't, either.

Three rounds later, and she had neither seen any danger nor won the argument. She dismissed thoughts of both and continued to walk, saving most of her attention for the other rock formations. If wyverns had survived, it was possible that so had bestial shainovaran, the creatures that had fed on her species, the falingas, before they had both developed sentience. Soralingas would not care for the task of explaining, without language, that different versions of the creature had achieved peace with her own kind in an alter-world to this one.

A loud scrape sounded across the gaps between their cliff and the next.

Even as she dropped into a crouch, Soralingas reminded herself that sound could carry a long way in this kind of air. She held still and searched in several different directions. She did move her left hand, slowly, towards the pouch of violet around her neck. If worst came to worst, she would simply open a door back to Wild, the same way she and Tamalheim had come here, and escape. If wyverns lived here, they were unlikely to die in the few alter-months it might be before she could come back.

How do you know that?

Soralingas hesitated, and kept her fingers on the outside of the pouch. She need only use it if worst came to worst.

She wound up staring, and not using it, when a figure stepped forward into the firelight, blinking at her. He was a male falingas, though she noted differences at once: he stood shorter than she did, with less pointed ears, and a less angular face. His whiskers, uncut, twitched and flicked in several directions.

Soralingas felt the shock cause a minor falling sensation in her head, and then the male smiled at her shyly and spoke in Wild.

"Am I intruding?"

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Beneath the Shifting Sands

By Brendon Taylor

About once every ten years, the sands shift in the Coable Desert near Briver Downs. As the dunes scatter beneath fierce winds that last more than a month, the redstones emerge in majestic formations. The beauty of the wide-spanning arches, broad-shouldered plateaus, and gully-bare ravines is lost on the folk of Briver Downs. The red of the rock is not the only reason the arid strip between civilization and the sands is called the Bloodland. When the sand shifts, plagues, infestation, and death come. too. When the winds relent and the air clears, the land drinks the blood of those who foolishly tempted the desert's temper.

Marden Tane sat on the upper-level balcony of his grand estate, letting the warm evening breeze sift through his robes. His views of the Downs to the east and Bloodlands to the west were without equal. Although he sought the balcony for its view, it was neither east nor west that he watched. Spiny points of stratus cacti pricked Marden's leg as he leaned over the back of his lounge to reach a tall spindle of wine. Drawing a long sip, he looked up at the sky. He had been there most of the evening, drinking more than usual.

Tethrin and Telitha, the twin moons, glowed high above. Telitha had been arcing toward Tethrin for several cycles and had nearly reached her brother. *Portentious*, he thought. Yes, that was the word for it. The wind seemed to pick up with the thought, like the warm breath of a whisper growing to a stern rebuke. His food stores were full and the window and door bars secure. Others would suffer in the storm that would surely come, but not Marden.

A procession of soldiers in the Duke's colors marching up the long courtway caught his eye. *Now, that is unexpected.* The only time Duke Shiangrel thought of Briver Downs was when it came time to count taxes, and those thoughts lingered only as long as the gold did.

Moments later, Marden's house maiden found him sitting on the balcony. "You've guests, Master Tane."

Marden swirled his nearly-empty spindle and set it aside. "Tell the duke's men I'll be down within the hour. Serve them date wine and offer them our guest chambers." He did not like unannounced visitors, even from the duke.

Nodding, the maiden said, "I took the liberty of serving them spiced wine, sir. I hope you don't mind—it was the silver seal, not the gold. And, although they are the duke's soldiers, not all of them are men. Shall I go offer them rooms?"

Marden rose and took a moment for his mind to clear. "Yes, but tell them I'll be down momentarily."

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes, fine. I just stood too quickly. Go, attend to our guests."

By the time Marden reached the guest hall, he had changed into a formal robe of green silk and gold embroidery. His hair was groomed and his face freshly washed. A dozen men milled at the far end of the room, drinking wine and paying little attention to the attendant refilling their glasses. A woman wearing a captain's badge lingered at a large oil painting on the near wall. Its reds and oranges brightened the room, but the scenes of arches and plateaus were sobering, like the embodiment of death.

"Welcome to my home, Captain." He bowed in formal greeting, trying to see her better.

She kept her eyes on the painting. "My men and I appreciate your hospitality, Marden Tane."

It was a slight affront that she didn't return the bow or face him, but who was he to question a captain in the duke's employ? "The artist would be flattered that his work draws your eyes so, Captain. Yet, you could see the land for yourself if you but stepped outside."

"Are you asking me to leave, Marden?" She turned to face him with a raised eyebrow.

He recognized the face at once and hoped she was jesting. "Of course not, Cimetra." He regretted using her familiar name as soon as it left his lips. *The rotten wine's going to get me hung*. He shook his head, hoping to clear it. "The duke's niece is welcome to stay in my home as long as she desires."

"What are you asking me now, Marden?" she jested.

He dared to laugh. "Clearly I should have let you do the talking from the start. What business brings you to Briver Downs, if you are at liberty to say?"

She finally returned the greeting bow. "Do you have a sitting room that we might use?" She glanced at the men who had begun to meander closer to them.

"Of course." He offered his arm.

She told the men to limit their drinking and took his arm.

Moments later, Cimetra Jayde stood quietly in front of a great stone creature in the center of Marden's formal receiving chamber. Even slouching, it stood more than nine feet tall with its long arms and dagger-like claws reaching the floor. In addition to being the most prized of Marden's renowned collection, it was the source of his ascension to wealth. The *Petrified Gahdir* had been featured at museums and courts throughout the duchy. Marden stood next to her and waited for her to speak.

"The death storms come soon," she said.

Marden waited for more, but she just stared at the creature. "Yes, I think you're right. Is that why you've come with soldiers? To guard the city?"

"Yes. And no." She reached out and felt the detail of the layered scales covering the limbs of the creature. A maiden brought more lamps to illumine the chamber and quickly slipped away. After the maiden was gone, Cimetra continued, "We come because the storm comes, but we're to meet the Gahdir in the desert before they can stir up the infestations and plagues."

"I hope you are jesting."

She stared at him in a way that assured she was serious.

Marden's hand shook a little as he touched her arm. "That's a death sentence. You'll have naught but a rabbit's chance against a hawk. I don't know what you did to offend the duke, but it may not be too late to go back and reconcile."

"Trust me, it's too late. By the time the wind stops blowing, my uncle will be free of one of his greatest problems, either the Gahdir or me. But I have good reason to think I'll succeed." She pulled free and walked over to some of the statuary on the walls. "You have a beautiful estate, Marden. You've done very well for yourself since you left Dagridon."

Marden nearly crumpled to the couch upon hearing the name of his home town—his stomach had already turned to ice.

"I was only twelve when you abandoned your given name and left Dagridon, but I remember you." Again, the raised eyebrow. "I would like to hear the story of how you found the Stone Gahdir."

Marden's tongue worked the inside of his dry mouth, yearning for a bit of drink. Or even spit. "I was exploring the edge of the Bloodlands... after the last great storm and saw some of his

head sticking out of the sand. I hired a couple of youths to help me dig him free and load him on a wagon." The words he had so often recited sounded wooden.

She shook her head. "That's it? That can't be the whole story, Marden. A couple hired youth. This thing must weigh a ton. How did you get it on the wagon with just a couple of youths?"

"I had to hire three more to get it loaded. We used levers and rolling logs." His fingers gripped a silk pillow and twisted it almost into a knot.

"You can stop right there, if you want. I'm not here to expose you as a fraud to the archaeological community. If I didn't remember you as Anchale, the artist who rejected the duke's entreaties to serve as his personal sculptor, I might have believed the whole notion of you finding this *petrified* Gahdir." She walked over to the end of the couch and sat next to him.

"Then, why are you here?"

"Like I said, I lead the duke's protectorate into the desert to destroy the Gahdir and stop the plagues."

"That may be why you came to Briver Downs, but that's not why you came to my house." Marden put the pillow down and clasped his hands together to keep them from shaking.

"I came to *invite* you to join me. You must have seen a living Gahdir up close to sculpt it so meticulously. Anyone with that intimate a knowledge of my prey should be very useful in the hunt."

Marden knew he would lose everything if he refused her. He wished he had hidden in that bottle of wine on the balcony and had never come out.

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Flinteye Learns a Lesson About Sharing

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

Purdues III wasn't worth the stone it was cut from. The two enormous moons which hovered in its sky made half the planet uninhabitable because of violent tides, and much of the rest of it consisted of endless deserts where constant dust storms and intense heat made them very uncomfortable for most beings. The only towns were on the Hoop Plateau, where settlers from the Alliance had come because of rich copper veins. Those had played out years ago, and the beings still living there stayed mostly out of stubbornness, with nothing but an occasional trading ship passing through. The Plateau itself was a maze of mountains, canyons, caves, spires, and arches.

All that made it an excellent hide-out for beings who didn't want to be found. Julli a-Andaq was one of those, and Lord Simdrell wanted him badly enough to pay fifteen thousand SEUs for his capture, alive or dead. He was reputed to be fairly good with a gun.

Axten and I set the Flint Shard down on an open stretch outside Colony 7, called "Dirthole" by some of its inhabitants and something much worse by the rest of them. As I walked down the landing ramp, with my usual pair of plasma pistols, my dagger, a lightweight slug rifle with sniper-scope, a pack full of ration bars and miscellaneous gear, and a handful of stun and shrapnel grenades, a human who looked like he had never seen water met me on the ground.

"Bounty hunter," he growled. "Why you here?"

He took a moment to look over my two-meter height, black-orb eyes, gold fur, black vest and pants, and a face that combined leonine and canine without the ears. A being with protruding fangs and a bulky slug rifle stood behind the human. He gave me an exaggerated snarl which I didn't bother to return.

"Bounty hunting," I answered. "Julli a-Andaq. Yellow skinned arachnid, six eyes. Did he come through here?"

"Yes. Left for the wild a month ago."

I growled in the back of my throat. A month to go underground in any one of a thousand caves.

"Which way?"

"For a knife I'll tell."

I handed him a ten centimeter polyplastic dagger. The being nodded, apparently satisfied, and said, "North. Out past Old Pincer."

"Thanks," I said, just as I heard Axten's clanging footsteps behind me. He always took longer getting his gear together, partially because he oiled his wrist blades and cleaned his finger gun before every job.

"What's this, Jalazar? Being robbed already?"

"No. Just getting information."

The human nodded. "For another knife this good, I'll tell you something that you'll want to know. Something important."

Quite a speech. He must want it badly. I gave him another—I carried a few on this sort of world, along with a couple boxes of slug bullets. More valuable than their weight in SEU chits.

He snatched the dagger and hid it in his greasy robe. "There's other bounty hunters here. Two. Don't know the names. One's a little guy, black reptile with horns all around and green

eyes. Got a big human with him—red hair, black armor."

I didn't recognize them, but there were millions of bounty hunters in the galaxy. "How long have they been here?"

"Left yesterday, on foot. There's nowhere to land a ship where Julli's gone."

I looked towards the town, which consisted of several clusters of single-story concrete buildings around a central mining pit. Many of them were obviously abandoned. "Any good places to eat here?"

"The Rock Pan."

"Thanks. Lock up the ship, Axten," I said, walking across the dusty ground towards the buildings.

The human's bodyguard shifted his grip on his rifle. "Wait. I want a knife too."

I pulled another polyplastic dagger from my vest—my last—and was tempted to use his throat as a throwing target. I tossed it in the ground at his feet.

Axten followed me into Dirthole. A moment later, so did the human and his thug.

* * *

The food at the Rock Pan had been harder than ration bars and even more bitter. But, a few hours after we had entered the desert the next day, I would have paid thousands for a few mugs of their watered ale.

The sun was a red giant, close enough to make even the planet's northern horizon sweltering during the summer. The air shimmered with heat, and the rough, red rock that made up the landscape rasped at my bare feet. Axten and I walked through a maze of bare stone with only occasional shrubs or avians. The giant moons had risen, but the sun was in the wrong place—no chance of an eclipse today.

I stopped on a boulder, within the shadow of a towering arch. This planet had once been much wetter. "Water," I panted to Axten.

"No, another couple hours. If you drink it all today, Jalazar, I'll have to carry you back to town, and neither of us would enjoy that."

"Alright," I growled. "But I'll die on my feet without water."

"Carefully rationed water isn't the same as none, Jalazar."

I stood up again and looked ahead. A few miles in front—maybe an hour's walk—stood a tall spire of bright crimson stone. A second spire, slightly shorter and tilted towards the first one, stood beside it. I assumed that was the Old Pincer.

"How are we going to find one being out here, anyway?" I asked Axten.

"Look for signs of habitation—smoke, old fires, bones—and run heat and sonic scans every night."

I grunted. "Why don't we walk at night, anyway?"

"I've already answered this, Jalazar. Slakals come out at night."

I had heard all about slakals from every being in the Rock Pan. They had taken turns explaining them to me, since offworlders didn't come often. I had gathered that they were serpentine creatures who hunted among the canyons at night, and that all evening hours should be spent crouched around a sonic emitter to ward them off. One of the tavern patrons had gleefully told me about some slakal which had swallowed a thirteen year-old child whole—they had found the bones in its stomach.

I was about to answer Axten, but was interrupted by the crack of a bullet against the

rock where I was standing. Almost without thinking, I dropped into cover on the side of the rock opposite where the bullet had come from. Axten was right next to me, ion rifle already clutched in his hands.

"Did you see where that came from?" I asked.

"A crevice at the foot of that arch," he said, waving at the rock structure whose top was visible above our cover.

I nodded. "I'll keep his attention. You sneak around and kill him."

"No, Jalazar. I can take a slug wound much better than you can."

"That's just what I was thinking. There's two of them."

Axten nodded. "The other hunters?"

"Who else?"

"Let me know when they're dead, alright?"

I nodded, drew a pistol, and thought about the best route. The boulder was the only good cover for five meters around. We were in a dusty bowl, overshadowed by the arch, but just a few meters away there was a stretch of broken rock that I could creep through fairly easily. A twenty-meter bluff stretched above that, glowing red in the sunlight.

"Distract now," I said.

I watched Axten over my shoulder as he leaned out just centimeters past the edge of the boulder and fired an ion stream. I broke into a crouching run. Another gunshot cracked, but I didn't see where the shot landed. Before I had time to think about a slug-sized hole in Axten's head, I was in cover again, behind a chunk of rock the size of a field latrine.

I crouched low to the ground, feeling hot dust on my bare arms, and crawled through the rubble, careful to keep out of sight of the sniper below the arch. The dust clogged my nostrils and rasped at my throat. The impulse to cough or sneeze was intense, but I fought it down and kept my mouth closed as much as possible.

My shoulder banged against a chunk of sharp-edged stone, and I felt the skin tear and blood well-up from the cut. I bit back a curse, closed my eyes, and clenched at the wound for a moment. I brushed dust away, still closing my eyes against the pain.

When I opened them, the barrel of a plasma rifle was centimeters away from my forehead.

Black, scaly hands with impressive talons held the weapon, and above them I saw a long-snouted reptilian face with protruding fangs, slit nostrils, and flaming green eyes. A ring of horns encircled his head, including a pair of short spurs that jutted from his chin.

"Greetings, bounty hunter," he hissed.

I didn't move. There was something about looking into a gun barrel that made my cut stop hurting.

"There isn't room for two teams in this hunt. There's only one bounty," the reptile continued. His voice was soft, but with a razor edge.

I waited. When he fired, I wouldn't even see the fatal bolt coming before it burnt through my skull.

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Fugitive Moments

By Jeff Wheeler

<Two Corian Cruisers intercepting our course. Mark eight. Mark seven. Mark six…>

"I see them," Darshee said, his fingers altering the coordinates and setting countermeasures while his eyes locked on the multiple dashboards. The bio-screens flashed in reds and golds, updating speed signatures and magnetic fluxes. "Ugly cruisers, but slow."

<It only takes one to figure out the shield algorithm, Darshee.>

"I know. I know. How many marks before they intercept?"

<Two. There are ten more approaching the event horizon.>

"Do you have the coordinates locked?"

<Of course I do.>

"Don't get testy, Austen."

<I'm a nav-computer. I don't get testy.>

"Have they figured out our shield algorithm yet? Boost speed."

<Has our power shut down yet? Obviously they have not.>

"Full thrusters then. Engage the seraphim coils."

<It's too early, Darshee.>

"I said engage them! You are a nav-computer. Obey!"

<Not when you're wrong. Mark minus one. Mark minus two.>

The bio-screen went livid with data pulses. The cruisers tried to jam the controls of the *Pemberly,* but the encrypted algorithm held them off. A thousand points of light instigated as weapons systems fired, but none of them would reach him in time. The pulsing lasers traveled at the speed of light. The *Pemberly*, now at full power, had reached Seraphim-phase Four.

<Coordinates locked. Byxlian galaxy passed. Qvar Eight galaxy passed. Norstar galaxy passed. Approaching Collier Time Loop. Really, Darshee, you should not have stolen it.>

"Since when do nav-computers have consciences?" Darshee said, squinting at the blizzard of galaxies swirling past the display. For an odd moment, he thought if he stuck out his tongue, they would gather there like snowflakes. "Power level draining. Any nova near the Collier Loop?"

<I would have told you if there were.>

"Prepare to jump the bridge."

<Already in progress, Darshee. Mark minus six. Mark minus seven.>

"Too slow!"

<Mark minus eight. Mark minus nine. Crossing Antipodes galaxy. We're in the Collier Loop.>

The *Pemberly* jolted, bucking like a fiendish colt, and then everything went as still as glass. There were no more stars. Of course, Darshee would not expect any inside the super-dense black hole dubbed the Collier Loop.

He smiled and ran his fingers across his sweaty scalp and hair. Easing back into his support cushions, he slowly let out his breath.

<You still shouldn't have stolen it, Darshee.>

"You're being a prude again, Austen. We're safe."

<True, the odds of any intelligent being finding us in the Loop is infinitesimally remote. In

fact, the precise odds…>

"Are not even worth mentioning. We did it, Austen. The shield encryption was worth what I paid for it. And stealing the coordinates was not that difficult."

<You barely made it out of the Dome alive.>

He shrugged. "That's all in the past, Austen. All in the past. Calculate the next jump point. Find the most likely proximity."

<I'm already doing that.>

He leaned back, stretching, listening to the subtle melody floating through his mind. The cerebral chip had uploaded everything. The dress. The mannerisms. The vocabulary. All salient facts, information, suppositions, and variabilities. He knew what crumpets they ate, what tea they drank, the banalities of conversation from the era.

<Approaching the jump point, Darshee.>

"That was fast."

<Time doesn't exist right now. What else did you expect?>

"A little more respect from you, Austen. It was superb execution. Brilliant forethought and excruciatingly detailed planning. If I don't say so myself."

<Not to mention a trillion-credit shield encryption. A bargain, I'm sure.>

"Testy again, Austen. Prepare to jump."

<Already working on it, Darshee.>

* * *

Darshee exited the *Pemberly* and inhaled the crisp air. The lack of pollution thrilled him. His boots crumbled the reddish stone as he tested the gravity and degree of infrared and ultraviolet radiation on his arms. He adjusted his molecular structure, calibrating it to the carbon half-life of this world.

"It looks like Utah back on Earth except for the moons," he said with a sniff, staring at the ridge of rock formation forming a natural bridge. The twin moons of the planet were silhouetted behind the bridge, offering a peek at a verdant lunarscape that the original Earth setting lacked. Would that have altered the story's outcome? Or inspired it?

<Earth is still pretty, Darshee.>

"But this is earth, Austen. Circa 1810. Nearly two thousand years ago."

<It's a rather dull imitation.>

"Where else would I park the *Pemberly*, hmm? If I hovered over London, they would see it from Oslo."

<Paris, more likely.>

"Always a pessimist. No, there are no signs of life in this area and will not be for at least thirty years or so. I'll be bored by then."

<What about the tribe we saw when we landed. I think they were all a little frightened.>

"They're a superstitious, clan-based group of primitives. I'm not worried. Have you tested the cerebral net? We'll have contact from here to London?"

<Easily. You could be on Jupiter and my net would still reach you.>

"Excellent. I'll be off then."

<To Jupiter?>

"I didn't travel to another galaxy in another time to visit Jupiter."

<You are still wearing your gear, Darshee. You'd better change.>

"Do it as you transport me." Darshee took a step and found himself in a haze of grainy sand before he felt solid footing again. The earth was spongy with fresh grass and the smell of lavender and prissy weed. Instead of a bujold rifle on his shoulder, it was an object that looked like a walking cane. A tight cravat strangled him and a wide-brim top hat settled in his mass of curls. His waistcoat fit snug and he was still getting used to the high boots. Ahead two young man sat astride fiery thoroughbreds.

"I say, the view is lovely. Absolutely lovely. Surely you agree, Mister Darcy."

"I would agree to nothing of the sort. It's a humble cottage. You could do better, Mister Bingley."

"Hardly so, Darcy. Hardly so. Look at the line of the roof. It is in splendid condition. And so near to town, I can hardly picture a more worthy home. My dear sisters…"

"Will be bored to distraction with the local ladies and their silly past-times. I tell you, Bingley, that this is not the place for you."

"I highly concur," Darshee said with a perfect British accent. He did not smirk when both men startled and took a moment to settle their horses. Instead, he slapped his leather gloves against his palm. "Unless you seek to own a home that was inhabited by drunkards and knaves."

"Good sir, you startled us," Mister Bingley said. Darshee had not expected the large wart on his nose. "We did not hear you approach."

"Indeed we did not. If we spoke any offense…" the other answered.

Darshee waved him off with a frown. "No apologies required, my good sirs. If I comprehended your conversation, I understand that you are interested in leasing that property there."

"Indeed I was," said Mister Bingley. "I came here for that express purpose."

"Whilst I came here to discourage it," said the other man, Darcy.

"It is a charming house. Though I beg your forgiveness sirs, for I leased it myself earlier this morning. Here is the deed."

<You are such a snake, Darshee.>

Ignoring the disapproval in Austen's voice, Darshee extended the wad of papers he had stolen from another world. "No hard feelings, Mister Bingley?"

A stormy look crossed Bingley's face. "I say. What deplorable timing. If I had ridden up a day earlier, as I had planned. This morning, you say? Zukes! Well, I shan't confess that I am *not* disappointed. Strange that the attorney would have sold it…"

"A canny coincidence, for sure," said Darcy. "Let's bid this gentleman goodbye and return to your sisters in London."

"In all haste. Might I have the pleasure of making your acquaintance?" He tipped his hat.

"My name is Darshee. Will Darshee."

As the two young men cantered off on their mounts, Darshee's face quirked into a smile.

<You know I don't like it when you get that look in your eye.>

"Yes, Austen. I know you hate it." He took off his hat and stared at the fabric and seams. How long had he been plotting this exploration? A hundred years? Two hundred?

The first step had just executed brilliantly. And if his and Austen's calculations were correct, Elizabeth Bennett would be at home with her sisters just a few miles away.

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Midstream

By Mike Loos

The walls of the cramped compartment shuddered as a low rumble spread across the *Jamar*. *They must have finally started fueling the spacecraft*, thought Petrick as a slow thrill of excitement spread through him. The launch sequence must be on track; it won't be long now. Petrick attempted to readjust his cramped legs into a position where they wouldn't lose circulation. When the time came, he couldn't afford to be slowed by anything.

Petrick let his mind wander. He thought of his family, his mother and father, brothers, and worried about the price they might pay for his actions. He prayed they would somehow be spared the wrath of the Sur-Aanen, but he knew how futile his hope was. They could always flee into the deep desert, he hoped—hide until the initial outrage had passed. Easy enough for him to say. He would be long gone when the real trouble came. Or dead. He also thought of Callia. She would eventually understand but would be angry that he hadn't told her. Callia would piece together the clues, though. She'd replay every moment of their last night together and come to realize what he'd been trying to tell her. She would pretend that she suspected, even then, as they crept beneath the Xanpeb Arch and prayed to the sister moons. But she would still be angry as she cursed his memory. Petrick decided to not think of that. He would rather remember what a wonderful night that was, although it seemed so far away now.

The sound of hatch releases interrupted Petrick's wanderings. The metal walls of the compartment flexed as the pressure equalized. He guessed that at least one, and perhaps two, individuals entered the outer chamber.

"Ten minutes, Sepa. No more. Control wants that panel changed before lockdown. Bypass the signal lines, but leave the rest of the console hot. Jumper the overrides if you have to. Then come find me when you're done."

"Yes, sir."

Petrick dared not move. As he sat, pinned in silence, he could hear every move that the technician made. She was working on the console directly adjacent to the one he was hiding in. One errant move and he would surely be detected. With the main hatch open, he could hear the sound of the launch clock echoing through the support structure.

Official countdown is one-five-three and zero. Mark. Condition is green.

Petrick imagined that the technician was Eyhnen, mixed blood, as he was. He had no way of really knowing, but if she was, he knew that she would *have* to complete her task before the crew began boarding. The Aanen would not tolerate her presence if she were here when they arrived. Of course, if they actually found someone like him hiding in the command module, the consequences would be unimaginable. He would be viewed as a saboteur and a heretic, and likely executed without recourse.

Countdown is one-four-five and zero. Mark.

Petrick heard the technician finish her work and leave. Silence returned. In his mind, he continually replayed the sequence of events that had to occur. Once the mission crew was on board and the final countdown underway, he'd have to wait until the last possible moment. Once the main engines were started, the launch would then be past the point of no return, but at the same time, he'd only have a few seconds to get into position. He would have to execute perfectly

to survive.

Official countdown is one-zero-nine and zero. Mark. Condition is green.

Petrick started to get worried. Where was the crew? Surely they must be boarding soon. Could there be a problem? His mind raced through a range of possibilities. Could he have already been detected? Were the Sur-Aanen simply waiting for him to make a move so that they could apprehend him? He ran through every worst-case scenario he could then think of. Should he risk a look outside? Petrick was reasonably confident no one was in the command module, but he couldn't say for sure. He didn't move.

Suddenly, the outer hatch releases cycled and Petrick could hear several individuals enter the command module. Finally, he thought. A flurry of activity started while minutes passed. Petrick strained to hear what was going on outside the compartment, but he could only hear a series of muffled rumblings and general movements that he couldn't see. He wished he could move his legs, then he realized that his shoulders were starting to cramp as well. He tried to flex his muscles slowly without moving, but it was nearly impossible. He tried to block the pain and discomfort from his mind.

Countdown is zero-five-two and zero. Mark.

Petrick thought he heard individuals exiting the command module, then the sound of the hatch locks. He felt the pressure in the chamber adjust slightly, then realized that the module must have been sealed for flight. Petrick closed his eyes and could feel the excitement quicken in his chest. This is the moment. There's no way out now.

Official countdown is zero-two-seven and zero. Main engine purge in five, four, three, two.... Commence main engine purge.

Petrick could feel the low-frequency vibrations reverberate through the structure as the main engines were being moved into position. He knew that he needed to start maneuvering himself to be able to exit the compartment soon. His legs had gone nearly numb, so he had to risk a series of slow movements to restore circulation. He hoped he'd be able to maneuver, even with little or no feeling in his legs.

Countdown is zero-one-zero and thirty... twenty... ten... Mark. Prepare for main engine start. We are a go for main engine start.

The vibrations in the spacecraft increased dramatically. Petrick knew it was time. He slipped his fingers into the edge where the compartment door joined with the console frame and pulled. Uhhhhh.... The door wouldn't budge. He adjusted his hands, braced his foot against the wall and pulled again. Still wouldn't move.

Countdown is zero-zero-eight and thirty... twenty... ten... Mark. Zero-zero-seven and counting...

Petrick started to panic.

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Long Arm of the Law

By Steven Richards

Rancher stepped out of time—and to the untrained eye, thin air—and paused in a patch of shade beneath a jutting spike of white stone. Normal space took a momentary detour around him while it considered the situation, then snapped back into place as his body shifted to conform with its rules. He stood still, adjusting, enjoying the wind on his bare skin. He surveyed the labyrinthine depths of the canyon around him, searching for his quarry. Water rushed through an underground stream beneath his feet, pulsing with life and energy—it glowed in contrast with the coolness of the dead stone. In the distance, perhaps a kilometer from where he stood, the stream split into watery veins and poured out into the open, gushing from striated rock. Farther still, fed by several such streams, a river formed, continuing the eternal, questing search for stasis. It would eventually find what it sought, when it flowed into the lake at the western edge of the canyons, where Rancher pumped it out to supply his own meager needs and that of his stock.

If only the humans would reach such stasis and leave him in peace. But it was against their nature, he knew. They had made that abundantly clear, over the years. They were such strange creatures, and yet, something about them always seemed familiar, as if their species and his were somehow related, through time and space and history long forgotten.

This one in particular. Rancher scanned the canyon briefly before picking him up again, far to the north. This one had almost as much knowledge of the land's intricacies as Rancher himself, and was making good time. The human was skilled. And Rancher was wearying of these incessant escape attempts. He wasn't as young as he used to be, when the humans first arrived in their malfunctioning tin can.

The third perimeter fence was reporting multiple breakthroughs—the humans had taken to sending out decoys on their recent runs. He ignored them, as usual. He knew who the real target was; you couldn't hide a signature like that, even from his untrained vision.

The pursuit began again, as the setting sun brought a fiery glow to the rock.

Michael called up the topo map to his right eye and checked his route for the nth time. He was still on course. The end of this cursed maze was very, very close. He allowed the implant in his chest to generate another dose of adrenalin. This could be the day, even if the decoys had failed miserably in their task.

He modified his stride slightly to cross a chasm, and spanned its five-meter gap with room to spare. His shadow, bulging strangely with equipment, stretched from the ridge on which he ran to the chasm wall opposite him. If he were to glance right, into the sun, he knew he would be able to see the enclave, glittering in the distance. He didn't dare. Another crevice came and went beneath his feet—a million more surrounded him. He kept his head down, vigilant.

Something *ping*ed inside his skull, notifying him of a blip on the Dispersal Team's latest gadget. The Warden was out there somewhere, following him, and the sensor had picked up its presence. Where or how far remained, unfortunately, a mystery, but Michael knew he was not in danger yet. He had made this run nearly a hundred times now, and he had come to trust his instinct, a more valuable instrument than his biomechanically-enhanced senses or all the

electronic wizardry the DT provided him with. He reached back in mid-stride to touch the stock of the rifle, his newest toy. Its presence reassured him—it always helped to have a few surprises for the Warden. You could guarantee he would have a few for you.

Michael launched himself into empty space with reckless speed, drawing a pair of explosive-bolt pitons from his belt. Bare rock rushed toward him, first ten meters away, then five, then none. His boots slammed into the wall, checking his speed. He drove the pitons forward. They punched into the stone and secured themselves in a matter of microseconds. Thus secured, he pulled himself up until he stood atop the protruding metal spikes, face-to-face with the rock wall with hands free. He uncoiled the grapnel line from his forearm, latched it to a drone and sent it on its way.

Rancher held a mangled snare—the same type of trap that caught this very human during his last attempt—in his hands and watched the wayward human climb. The tiny, distant figure broadcast a tight beam of energy back to the human nest, no longer concerned about revealing his position. What information he was sending, Rancher didn't know, and did not particularly care. He had long since given up on deciphering their airy speech and binary signals. Someday, perhaps, he would be forced to reveal the humans' presence, and a linguist would come in contact with them.

The human hesitated at the lip of the cliff—checking for more traps, no doubt—before placing his arms atop it and swinging up. Rancher folded the snare and placed it in his satchel. He would have to step into the higher regions to catch this one if he wanted the chase to end today. The decoys were already venturing uncomfortably close to the borders of his land.

He stepped out of normal space. Familiar terrain blurred and faded, giving way to truer underlying spatial characteristics—and valuable spatial flaws. He searched briefly for a local pocket, and soon found one that wrinkled to a layer reasonably close to the human. He folded himself into it and came out on the ridge, which had long since been vacated.

There he was, already several layers away, bounding through twisted space with an unnatural, gravity-bound gait. Rancher set out after him, sliding into the low points like water, always running downhill. He was catching up.

Seventy-three attempts by this one human, and he always caught up.

Seventy-three attempts, and the Warden always caught up. Michael felt another frantic *ping* as his pursuer jumped from the customary base dimensions to one of the many higher levels—but not quite high enough that the DT had yet to create a device able to sense it. Michael knew the Warden was fully capable of doing so, at considerable expense of energy.

Well, they had a little surprise ready for him if he did.

Assuming the thing even worked.

Michael sent another tight-beam transmission back to the enclave, updating his position and status: *Warden closing in second or third level; intend to engage*. He had been given strict orders to use the rifle only as a last resort, at the moment capture became imminent. The higher-ups called it a professional courtesy. Michael understood their desire to avoid a direct confrontation. He knew, as all the runners knew, that if the Warden so chose he could annihilate the entire enclave in an hour's time. Yet—aside from two early incidents—he had never harmed a runner. No one was quite willing to jeopardize a thousand years of relative safety for the faint

possibility of injuring the god-like Warden.

It was a curious relationship.

The response came back from the enclave, short and to the point: *understood*. Michael put on a burst of speed, sensing another jump just before the sensor registered it. A snare burst out of the ground in front of him, and he split it in two with his flux-knife before realizing he'd drawn the blade. He doubted the Warden would replace this set.

A shimmering figure stretched out its arm to block his path. The sensor went berserk. Michael dove under the arm and rolled. The rifle slipped from his back and landed in his waiting hands. The Warden jumped again, leaving an implosion of empty air behind him and a crackling streak of energy. Michael lunged forward, ready for the maneuver, and spun in mid-air, catching a glimpse of the ghost-like presence as it prepared to jump again.

The rifle hummed as he fired.

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Paying for Redemption

By Amy R. Butler

It was so very *wet*.

Yurrel felt like he was drowning. The moisture in the air was so thick, and his air filter had broken several leagues behind. He had learned to adapt, after several terrifying hours learning by experience that the atmospheric water wouldn't drown him at all, just make breathing suffocatingly difficult.

He shouldn't have been able to breathe the wet air at all, but he had been born that way. Parents terribly disappointed. Parents of a people who ate rock and drank fire, or that's what the wet people said. But he was visiting this wet planet and these wet people for relief. He hoped to find it, somewhere out of sight in the power of the sun.

Yurrel felt a droplet of sweat pucker on his forehead, and he hastily wiped it away with a cloth. He wondered idly what it would be like to bathe in water. The quiet, smooth coolness surrounding the body, embracing… he shoved the thought away. Freezing coldness, fluidity that clung to the body and left traces even after the victim had climbed free. Blue death.

Yurrel scampered down a steep sand dune, the momentum nearly smashing him into a rock. He took a breath, shoved off, and kept going. At the top of the rock he paused, his eyes looking for the best direction to go.

A movement made his throat catch, a raspy sound escaping as terror sparked every nerve. The creatures—no. No, he was safe. It was one of the wet people. Yurrel relaxed. He was surprised for a moment that one of the wet people was this far out in the desolation; there were no settlements anywhere near, and the ground couldn't support any nomadic bands.

While his curiosity left him standing, trusting, in plain sight and shot, the wanderer looked up, shaded his eyes against the sun, then thrust his hand up in the common greeting of the world.

Yurrel hesitated. It didn't seem right, a wet person this far from water. Still, he raised his hand slowly, and the little man resumed his walk, but with more purpose, toward where Yurrel stood.

Yurrel watched in small amazement as the little man with layered patch-work robes, striped pants, and a floppy pointed hat pushed his way through the sand to come leaning against the little stone hill that Yurrel gazed down from.

"Hello!" the little man said with a smile on his face.

Yurrel stared at him in silent amazement. The wet man's smile was starting to disappear before Yurrel answered in his own language.

The wet man quickly switched his dialect to match. "Ohhh, a Sepsterian. What a treat! Truly, truly. Ah, but I've forgotten my pleasantries. They call me Tymah."

"Yurrel," he gave up reluctantly. The wet man was so energetic for one with little visible water. Yurrel didn't even see a lone canteen.

"What a pleasure," Tymah said. "But a Sepsterian. What are you doing all the way out here?"

"I could ask you the same."

"Oh of course. What is a 'wet person' doing out this far into the desolation?" Tymah smiled

indulgently. “It is, unfortunately, a religious compulsion. No one comes out here unless they have religious reason or they want to die.”

He smiled. Yurrel thought it odd.

“Religious orders on my planet are very radical,” Yurrel said cautiously. “Is it the same on your planet?”

“Oh, no,” Tymah said. “They’re all quite pleasant.”

“They just make strange demands.”

“Don’t they all?”

They stood there for a minute in uncomfortable silence, like faint acquaintances who stopped to exchange pleasantries, then were unsure of what to say or do. Tymah still smiled demurely. Yurrel shifted his pack.

“I have to continue,” Yurrel said.

“Of course.” Tymah blinked. “Might I join you?”

Yurrel tried to get a clear view of his face, but the top half was hidden in the shadow of his hat brim. “How do you know where I am going?”

“Aren’t we all going toward the same place in this desolation?” When Yurrel didn’t reply, Tymah made a suggestion. “You’re headed for the Oracle.”

“Yes,” Yurrel said. “That’s true.”

“Well, then, you should be grateful I found you. You’re veering to the west. In a couple of hours, you’d have been lost beyond hope.”

Tymah brandished a thin, specter-like wand and started to march off. He glanced over his shoulder, the wide brim of his hat flopping about. “This way, Yurrel! You’ll never get there if you keep that pace.”

Brushing aside his surprise, Yurrel caught up with Tymah and walked beside him.

“The walk is long,” Tymah said. “Tell me the news of your home world! Though we can see your star so brightly in the sky, news from Sepster is very scant. My people are fascinated by you.”

There was a reason for that. Sepster was a dim planet for all its heat and light. Even most Sepsterians only heard rumors of what their ruling party plotted and schemed, but Yurrel knew more now, oh so much more, understood why contact was limited, felt a wince when he thought of those shadowy corridors where he had learned everything he needed to prepare himself for this trip. It was dark, but his need for redemption was too great to refuse the rulers’ request.

“We continue much as we have since we withdrew from the Old War.” The sun beat mercilessly. Yurrel enjoyed it, but he was surprised that his companion seemed so comfortable in his heavy outfit.

“And you, are you of this world?” Yurrel asked.

“Originally, yes,” Tymah said. “I left when I was young and have traveled much since then. I had a thirst for—religious redemption, you might say.”

Yurrel stopped, his heels sinking into the sand. Tymah turned to face him, a mild expression on his face, not one entirely pleasant anymore. They stood in the middle of a sand valley, low and sinking, surrounded by dunes, and by the light of the sun and the moons, Yurrel understood that their meeting was not a coincidence.

“I have felt a need for redemption, too,” Yurrel said slowly. He was uncertain whether to trust this Tymah, this wet man. Their meeting was not in the plans. There were many who would oppose the rulers’ plans, but out in this desolation with no one else around, he had no choice but to trust Tymah.

"I need redemption for my own failure," Yurrel said. "For what I have been ridiculed and shamed for my entire life. I was told if I obeyed my leaders, my genetic inadequacy would be forgiven."

Tymah didn't look at all impressed or surprised.

"I knew this," he said calmly.

Yurrel stared at him, stunned. "You did?"

"Well, of course, of course," Tymah repeated, muttering to himself almost. "Why, I was sent to stop you. You must be stopped, you understand that."

As Yurrel stared and began to shout his protests, Tymah lifted his arms toward the heavens, his wand glowing at one end. The moons turned deep blue; lightning forked from clear skies. Cracks and peals louder than thunder split Yurrel's eardrums. He scrambled away from Tymah, fumbling for something in his pack that might be used as a weapon. The sands began to jump then, betraying Yurrel's feet, and soon he felt himself slipping, feet unable to find a purchase, and the sand swallowed Yurrel, and he wondered if this was what it felt like to drown.

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The Nahi

By D.J.R.

Asha raised his eyes to the mirror. He did not see himself, but the past reflected in his eyes.

A small child, awoken by a stifled scream and newly broken glass, rises from bed and peeks out of his doorway. Down the hall his mother stands, hands at her sides, silhouetted by the bathroom light. Curious, he pads across the floor, holding his favorite noshpet, which wiggles in his grip and licks his chin with a warm, wet slurp. He smiles. His mother kneels, back still to him. He peeks over her shoulder.

Asha dropped his eyes from the mirror, but the memory continued to flood his thought. He backed out of the bathroom and fell, sitting, onto his bed. Tears threatened to break his hold, but he would not let them. He put his hands to his head, trying to stop the memory. It came.

"No!" his father yells, backing further into the corner between the tub and wall. "Get him away from me."

The boy holds the noshpet close, trying to hide, instinctively moving toward his mother. She is crying and stares at him for a moment in shock before she takes him into her arms, holding him close. She turns his head away, but he wants to see; he wants to understand why papa is angry. Why doesn't papa want him? Was he bad that day? What had he done?

He fights his mother's hands, eyes falling on dark-amber liquid spattered on the floor. He knows that color. It leaks out of his scrapes when he falls.

His father lunges forward, half slipping on the dark-amber liquid. The bathroom light reflects off the shattered mirror, a piece of which is in his hands.

"Get him away from me…now! Both of you get away!"

"Halri," his mother pleads, "don't, don't do this. You don't know if…"

"Do as I say, Margret." His father holds the shard just above his neck line. Tears are falling from his eyes. He whispers, "They are already on their way. The word has been given." He lowers the shard of mirror away from him for a moment. "You must take him to your Humanitarians. The colony is the only place he will be safe."

His mother is holding him so tight it almost hurts. She's shaking her head. "Halri," her pleading voice whispers.

The bathroom light reflects in his eyes as the mirror shard moves. He can't fight free of his mother's hands. They're pushing his head away, toward his room, and she is screaming wordlessly. He doesn't understand what's going on. His mother is standing with him in her arms. They are going down the hallway. They are leaving papa. He was hurt. Why is mama leaving papa?

The boy fights a last look to see a pool of dark-amber inching across the bathroom floor.

Asha stared across the room and out the window as the memory receded. He understood now, thirty Ilsha years later. He understood all too well. Outside, the evening sky began to take over the daylight. Two planets hovered in the darkening sky, seemingly above their joint moon, Ilsha. His prison of thirty years, only his watchers didn't like to call it that.

He stood and moved to the window, observing the variety that streamed below. The bright colors of the rycion skin contrasted sharply with the desert background of Ilsha. Intermixed with

the enforced residents were their warders in uniforms of silver and black.

He mentally brushed away where the memory had been. His father had spoken rightly. The Humanitarians had protected him and his mother when the 'extermination' had begun. But the irony of their name remained to mock him. He was a hybrid—not human and not rycion, yet both. And thus he could never belong to either.

He watched his fellow colony inmates walk by, going about their lives. They were allowed to live a relatively normal existence. Asha himself was learning the physics of space travel, though he would never be allowed to go anywhere. The memory affected his psyche and he sighed tiredly. Such things were part of his rycion heritage, but his were mild in comparison. Rycions were known to actually re-live memories so vividly that any wounds incurred physically manifested themselves to a small extent on their bodies.

Soft harp music began to play in his room and a blue light flashed beside his com screen. He walked over to it and pushed 'answer'.

Manny smiled at him.

"Asha! Good, I caught you before you left. I found something very interesting. I've been going over Earth's history and…"

"Tek, are you crazy?" Asha said, sitting down, eyes wide. If their warders heard them use any name but their 'call name', they would be punished severely. 'Accidents' had happened to them for lesser infractions. Asha knew though that it was just one more way to keep them under control.

"Relax," Manny waved a pale, tan hand into the air before leaning over and speaking in a low voice, "I've blocked the line from intruders. The warders will think it's another glitch in the system. Those bugs are so annoying." He winked. "Anyway, as I was saying." Manny paused for a moment, concern flashing across his face. "You look exhausted." Then he nodded to himself "Another recall episode. Well this should get your mind going in a different direction. I've been going over Earth's history and I found an article you've really got to read. Remember the obscure 'Invisible Sun' theory and all those reports of a Chaos Cult? Well….you'll see. Curious yet? How soon can you come down?"

Asha shook his head, half laughing at himself for even trying to open his mouth to get a word in edgewise. Manny was always crazy enthusiastic with his wild ideas, but it was part of what Asha liked about him.

"Yes, immensely, and I'm working until ten. I'll be there after that."

"Make it eleven. You'll have to wait an extra hour, just for that. Out."

The com screen went black. Asha stared at it a moment with a crooked smile before standing and glancing at the bathroom. He decided to skip a wash-up before work, and instead gathered his notebook and extra disks.

News reports of the Chaos Cult had increased of late—they were crazies that he probably would never have to worry about. Humans who decided to kill as many others as they could in the name of mercy with the belief that Chaos was on its way to rule the universe. Stuffing all of his things he'd gathered in a bag, he walked out the door, musing on what Manny had said.

* * *

Mibahi awoke, damp with sweat and breathing heavily. He shuddered as the memory of the dream continued to haunt him when he stood and turned on the light. His room was plain and simple with two desks, a lamp, a bed and a cluttershelf. The clock blinked a yellow light,

telling him it was not quite light outside.

He still had time to sleep, but he knew he could not go back to sleep. He couldn't close his eyes without seeing horror. He sat back down on his bed and wrapped his blankets around him, forcing his breathing to calm. A kindly warder had once taught a meditation class, which had often soothed him and helped him when recall episodes occurred.

His dreams had gotten worse of late. When he was younger, and had first arrived on Ilsha, they had terrified him. Now he just wanted to understand what they meant.

He switched his window to ambient view and watched as the scenery shifted between autumn gold and summer green, between endless plateaus and boundless ocean. Images of Tamleck and alien environments he guessed were from Earth came and went. He'd never been to Earth, but thought it quite beautiful, a different sort of beauty from Tamleck.

Then, as it often did, images of his dream began to appear before him. He knew the window was not showing them, but that his mind was re-creating them in front of him. He stared solidly at the window screen facing each picture of horror, one by one. It was the only way he would be able to return to sleep.

He could hear his old meditation instructor speaking to him from his memories.

"What do you see?"

At first he'd been afraid to answer her, afraid she'd think him crazy and do to him what had been done to his parents. But now he knew and answered her aloud, though she was no longer there to hear him.

"Red. Amber. The blood of two races. As planets around the sun they sit. Alone they burst and spatter, and disappear, all but a few drops, into the vastness of space."

"And together?" her voice ghosted in his ear.

He cocked his head. "They remain whole, a few drops shed to disappear into nothingness."

The image shifted and he tensed.

"Remember, you are the master of your dreams."

Mibahi stared at the image, fighting down his fear and sense of horror that rose with them, and embracing the scene before him, knowing they had no control over him at that moment.

"What do you see?"

"Shadow swallows up the light. Marbles spill from a pouch and bounce around, spinning, spread apart on a floor of rainbow stone. Two turn to gas and one to ice. A woman is pushed from a bridge, a child falls into a vast ocean of fire, and keeps falling even after the water swallows him. And…a grain of sand falls from the sky."

"How do you feel?" he could hear his instructor ask.

"The woman pushed from the bridge for some reason is more frightening than the disappearing light and the drowning child."

"What does your logic tell you?"

Mibahi watched the images of his dream fade to be replaced by quiescent scenes. He sighed into his empty room and answered the lingering question of his instructor. "I still don't know what much of it means, but I'm now more certain than ever that we are the Nahi, and that time is running out."

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